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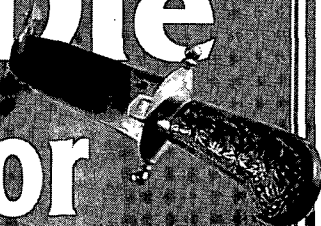
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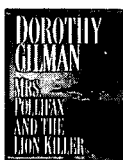
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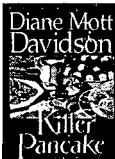
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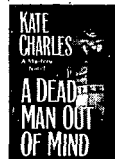
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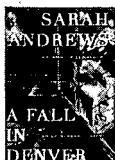
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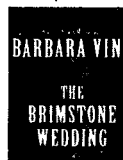
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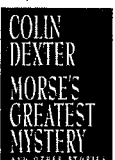
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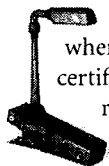
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Several months ago, in October 1995, to be precise, *A Maiden's Grave*, Jeffery Deaver's new novel, was published, with an excellent review in *Publisher's Weekly*. PW called the book "outstanding" and "gripping," spoke of Deaver as a "great thriller writer," and mentioned the "heartbreakingly real characters" and "the multiple-whammy twists that bring the novel, Deaver's best to date, to its spectacular finish."

Author of our cover story "Interrogation," Jeffery Deaver is a former folksinger, journalist, and lawyer with degrees from the University of Missouri School of Journalism and Fordham University School of Law. He lives in Virginia, authored a law book in 1984, and has written a handful of short stories and ten novels, two of them nominated for Edgar awards.

We are very pleased indeed to welcome him to AHMM.

We are equally glad to welcome back William Link, author of "Memory and Murder." Between 1959 and 1966, Mr. Link wrote fifteen stories for AHMM, always in collaboration with the late Richard Levinson. The team of Levinson and Link is a most notable one in Hollywood (and elsewhere), having created and/or developed fifteen TV series including *Columbo*; *Murder, She Wrote*; *McCloud*; *Ellery Queen*; and *Mannix* among many other accomplishments and earning far too many awards to list here. We can only mention that Mr. Link has garnered two Emmys, two Golden Globes, four Edgars, the Ellery Queen Award for Lifetime Achievement in the art of the mystery story, and a Tony nomination for *Merlin*.

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# INTERROGATION

## Jeffery Deaver



Illustration by Tim Foley

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“H e’s in the last room.”

The man nodded to the sergeant and continued down the long corridor, grit underfoot. The walls were yellow cinder block, but the hallway reminded him of an old English prison, brickly and soot-washed.

As he approached the room, he heard a bell somewhere nearby, a delicate ringing. He used to come here regularly but hadn’t been in this portion of the building for months. The sound wasn’t familiar, and despite the cheerful jingling, it was oddly unsettling.

He was halfway down the hallway when the sergeant called, “Captain?”

He turned.

“That was a good job you guys did. Getting him, I mean.”

Boyle, a thick file under his arm, nodded and continued down the windowless corridor to Room I-7.

What he saw through the square window: a benign-looking man of about forty, not big, not small, thick hair shot with gray. His amused eyes were on the wall, also cinder block. His slippered feet were chained, his hands, too, the silvery links looped through a waist bracelet.

Boyle unlocked and opened the door. The man grinned, looked the detective over.

“Hello, James,” Boyle said.

After a lengthy pause the prisoner said, “So you’re him.”

Boyle looked at the lean face, with a one- or two-days’ growth of salt-and-pepper beard, the eyes blue as Delft china. The detective had been tracking down and putting away murderers for nineteen years. He saw in James Kit Phelan’s face what he always saw in such men and women at times like this. Insolence, anger, pride, fear.

But something was missing, Boyle decided. What? Yeah, that was it. Behind the eyes of most prisoners sitting in interrogation rooms was a pool of bewilderment. In James Phelan this was absent.

Boyle dropped the file on the table. Flipped through it quickly.

“You’re the one,” Phelan muttered. “The one finally got me.”

“Oh, I don’t deserve all the credit, James. We had a lotta folks out looking for you.”

“But the word is they wouldn’t’ve kept going you hadn’t been riding their tails. No sleep for your boys and girls’s what I heard.”

Boyle, a captain and the head of Homicide, had overseen the Granville Park murder task force of five men and women working full time—and dozens of others working part time (though everyone seemed to

have logged at least ten, twelve hours a day). Still, Boyle hadn't testified in court, had never had a conversation with Phelan before today, never seen him up close. He expected to find the man looking very ordinary. Boyle was surprised to see another quality in the blue eyes. Something indescribable. There'd been no trace of this in the confession tape. What was it?

Before Boyle could nail down what he sensed, James Phelan's eyes grew enigmatic once again as he studied the detective's sports clothes. Jeans, Nikes, a purple Izod shirt. Phelan wore an orange jumpsuit.

*Anyway, what it was, I killed her.*

"That's a one-way mirror, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Who's behind there?" The man peered at the dim mirror, never once; Boyle noticed, glancing at his own reflection.

"We sometimes bring witnesses in to check out suspects. But there's nobody there now. Don't need 'em, do we?"

Phelan sat back in the blue fiberglass chair. Boyle opened his notebook, took out a Bic pen. Boyle outweighed the prisoner by forty pounds, most of it muscle, and Phelan's shackles were short-linked to keep his hands and legs close to his body. Still,

Boyle set the pen far out of the man's reach.

*Anyway, what it was . . .*

"I've been asking to see you for almost a month," Boyle said amiably. "You haven't agreed to a meeting until now."

Sentencing was on Monday, and after the judge pronounced one of the two sentences he was deciding upon at this very moment—life imprisonment or death by lethal injection—James Kit Phelan would be permanently giving up the county's hospitality for the state's.

"Meeting," Phelan repeated. He seemed amused. "Wouldn't 'interrogation' be more like it? That's whatcha got in mind, right?"

"You've confessed, James. Why would I want to interrogate you?"

"Dunno. Why'd you put in, let's see, was it something like a dozen phone calls to my lawyer over the past coupla months wanting to 'meet' with me?"

"Just some loose ends on the case. Nothing important."

In fact, Boyle struggled to keep his excitement hidden. He'd despaired of ever having a chance to talk to Boyle face to face; the longer the captain's requests had gone unanswered, the more he brooded that he'd never learn what he was desperate to know. Today was Saturday, and only an hour ago

he'd been packing up turkey sandwiches for a picnic with the family when the phone had rung with a call from Phelan's lawyer. He'd sent Judith and the kids on ahead and sped to the county lockup at ninety miles per hour.

*Nothing important . . .*

"I didn't want to see you 'fore this," Phelan said slowly, "'cause I was thinking maybe you just wanted to, you know, gloat."

Boyle shook his head goodnaturedly. But he also admitted to himself that he certainly had something to gloat about. When there'd been no arrest immediately following the murder, the case had quickly turned sour, and it had turned personal. Chief of Homicide Boyle versus the elusive, unknown killer.

The contest between the two adversaries escalated, became a raging battle. First in the tabloids, then in the police department and—finally, insidiously—in Boyle's mind. Still taped up behind his desk was the front page of the *Post*, which showed a picture of dark-haired, swarthy Boyle glaring at the camera from the right-hand side of the paper while the artist's composite of Anna Devereaux's killer gazed outward from the left. The two pieces of art were separated by a bold, black VS., and the detective's was by far the scarier image.

Boyle remembered the press conference held six months to the day after the murder in which he promised the people of the town of Granville that, though the investigation had bogged down, the police weren't giving up hope and that the killer would be caught. Boyle had concluded, "That man is *not* getting away. There's only one way this's going to end. Not in a draw. In a checkmate." The comment—which a few months later became an embarrassing reminder of his failure—had, at last, been validated. The headline of every newspaper story about Phelan's arrest read, of course, *CHECKMATE!*

There was a time when Boyle would have taken the high ground and sneered down the suggestion that he was gloating over a fallen enemy. But now he wondered. Phelan had for no apparent reason killed a defenseless woman and had eluded the police for almost a year. It had been the hardest case Boyle had ever run, and he'd despaired many times of ever finding the perp. But by God, he'd finally won. Yes, yes, maybe there was a part of him that had come here today for the purpose of gazing down at his trophy.

*. . . I killed her. . . . And there's nothing else I have to say.*

"I just have a few questions to

ask you," Boyle said. "Do you mind?"

"Talking about it? Guess not. It's kinda boring, though, you ask me. Ain't that the truth about the past? Boring."

"Sometimes."

"That's not much of an answer. The past. Is. Boring. Hey, you ever shot anybody?"

Boyle had. Twice. And killed them both. "We're here to talk about you."

"I'm here 'cause I got caught. You're here to talk about me."

Phelan slouched in the chair. The chains clinked softly. It reminded him of the bell he'd heard when he entered the interrogation room corridor.

Boyle looked down at the open file.

"So what do you want to know?" Phelan asked.

"Only one thing," Boyle said, caressing the battered manila folder. "Why'd you kill her?"

"'Why?'" Phelan repeated slowly. "Yeah, everybody asked me about the motive. Now, motive's a big word. A ten dollar word, my father'd say. But 'why?' That cuts right to the chase."

"And the answer is?"

"Why's it so important?"

It wasn't. Not legally. You only need to establish motive if the case is going to trial or if the confession is uncorroborated or

unsupported by physical evidence. But it had been Phelan's fingerprints that were found at the crime scene, and the DNA testing verified that Phelan's skin was the tissue dug from beneath Anna Devereaux's perfect dusty-rose polished fingernails. The judge accepted the confession without any state presentation of motive, though even he had suggested to the prisoner that he have the decency to explain why he'd committed this terrible crime. Phelan had remained silent, unemotional, and let the judge read him the guilty verdict.

"We just want to complete the report," Boyle said casually.

"'Complete the report,'" Phelan mocked. "If that ain't some bureaucratic crap, I don't know what is."

In fact Boyle wanted the answer for a personal, not professional, reason. So he could get some sleep. The mystery of why this drifter and petty criminal had killed the thirty-six-year-old wife and mother had been growing in his mind like a deadly tumor. In the past week alone—when it looked like Phelan was going down to Katona maximum security without ever agreeing to meet Boyle—the captain had wakened abruptly three times, sweating, plagued by what he called Phelanmares. The dreams had nothing to do



with Anna Devereaux's murder; they were a series of gut-wrenching scenes in which the prisoner was whispering something to Boyle, words that the detective was desperate to hear but could not.

"Makes no difference in the world to us or you at this point," Boyle said evenly. "But we just want to know."

"'We?'" the prisoner asked coyly, and Boyle felt he'd been caught at something. Phelan continued, "Suppose you folks have some theories."

"Not really."

"No?"

Phelan swung the chain against the table and kept looking the captain over. Boyle was uncomfortable. Prisoners swore at him all the time. Occasionally they spit at him, and some even attacked him. But Phelan just had that curious expression on his face—what the hell did it mean?—and adjusted his smile. He kept studying Boyle.

"That's a weird sound, ain't it, captain? The chain. Hey, you like horror films?"

"Some. Not the gory ones."

Three ringing taps. Phelan laughed. "Good sound effects for a Stephen King movie, don'tcha think? Or Clive Barker. Chains at night."

"How 'bout if we go through the facts again? What hap-

pened. Might refresh your memory."

"You mean my confession? Why not? Haven't seen it since the trial."

"I don't have the video. How 'bout if I just read the transcript?"

"I'm all ears."

"On September thirteenth you were in the town of Granville. You were riding a stolen Honda Nighthawk motorcycle."

"That's about right."

Boyle lowered his head and in his best jury-pleasing baritone read from the transcript, "I was riding around just, you know, seeing what was there. And I heard they had this fair or festival or something, and I kept hearing this music when I cut back the throttle. And I followed it to this park in the middle of town.

"There was pony rides and all kinds of food and crafts and stuff like that. Okay, so I park the bike and go looking at what they got. Only it was boring, so I walked off along this little river, and before I went too far, it went into this forest and I seen a flash of white or color or something, I don't remember what. And I went closer, and there was this woman sitting on a log, looking at the river. I remembered her from town. She worked in some charity store downtown. You

know, where they donate stuff and sell it and the money goes to a hospital or something. I thought her name was Anne or Annie or Anna or something."

Anna Devereaux. . . .

"She was having a cigarette, like she'd snuck off to have one, like she'd promised everybody she wasn't going to but had to have one. The first thing she did when she heard me come up was drop the cigarette on the ground and crush it out. Without even looking at me first. Then she did and looked pretty freaked. I go, "Hey." She nodded and said something I couldn't hear and looked at her watch, like she had someplace she really had to be. Right. She started to walk away. And when she passed me, I hit her hard in the neck, and she fell down. Then I sat on her and grabbed this scarf she was wearing and pulled it real tight and I squeezed until she stopped moving, then I still kept squeezing. The cloth felt good on my wrists. I got off her, found the cigarette. It was still burning. I finished it and walked back to the fair. I got a snow cone. It was cherry. And got on my bike and left.

"Anyway, what it is, I killed her. I took that pretty blue scarf in my hands and killed her with it. And there's nothing else I have to say."

Boyle'd heard similar words

hundreds of times. He now felt something he hadn't for years. An icy shiver down his spine.

"So that's about it, James?"

"Yeah. That's all true. Every word."

"You know," Boyle began, "I've been through the confession with a magnifying glass, I've been through your statements to the detectives, I watched the interview, the one you did with that TV reporter . . ."

"She was a fox."

"But you never said a word about motive."

The ringing again. The waist chain, swinging like a pendulum against the metal table leg.

"Why'd you kill her, James?" Boyle whispered.

Phelan shook his head. "I don't exactly . . . it's all muddy."

"You must've thought about it some."

Phelan laughed. "Hell, I thought about it tons. I spent days talking it over with . . ." He stopped talking abruptly.

"Who?"

"Just this friend. Nobody—"

"Who was he?" Boyle asked quickly. His detective instinct had taken over and was trying to run to ground an escaping fact.

"Didn't have nothing to do with what happened."

"He harbored you." Boyle fell into cop-speak before he re-

minded himself to be more conversational.

"Just a guy. He's a biker. He put me up for a few months."

Boyle knew he'd never get the name. He was afraid Phelan would stonewall if pushed. He let it go.

Phelan continued, "Anyway, what it was, him and me, we'd pass a bottle around and spend days talking 'bout it. See, he's a tough son of a bitch. He's hurt people in his day. But it was always 'cause they crossed him. Or for money. Or something like that. He couldn't figure out why I'd just up and kill that lady."

"Well?"

"We didn't come up with no answers. I'm just telling you that it ain't like I didn't think about it."

"So you drink some, do you, James?"

"Yeah. But I wasn't drinking that day. Nothing but lemonade."

"How well did you know her? Anna Devereaux?"

"Know her? I didn't know her."

"I thought you said you did." Boyle looked down at the confession.

"I said I'd *seen* her. Same as I seen the pope on TV one time. And Julia Roberts in the movies. And I've seen as much of Sheri Starr the porn queen as there is

to see, but that don't mean I know her. Or the pope either."

"She had a husband."

"I heard."

The ringing again. It wasn't the chains. The sound came from outside. The bell he'd heard when he first entered the interrogation room corridor. Boyle frowned.

Phelan was watching him, a bemused smile on his face. "That there's the coffee-break cart, captain. Comes around every morning and afternoon."

"It's new."

"Started about a month ago. When they closed the cafeteria."

Boyle nodded, looked down at his blank notebook. He didn't know they'd closed the cafeteria. He said, "They'd talked about getting divorced. Anna and her husband."

"What's his name?" Phelan asked. "The husband? He that gray-haired guy sitting in the back of the courtroom?"

"He's gray-haired, yes. His name's Bob."

The victim's husband was known to everyone as Robert. Boyle hoped that Phelan would somehow stumble over the name difference and give something away.

"So you're thinking he hired me to kill her."

"Did he?"

Phelan grunted. "Nope."

*The cloth felt good on my wrists. . . .*

Robert Devereaux had seemed to the interrogating detectives to be the model of a grieving husband. He'd passed a voluntary lie detector test, and it didn't seem very likely that he'd had his wife murdered for a fifty thousand dollar insurance policy.

Anna Devereaux. Thirty-six. Well liked in the town.

Wife and mother.

A woman losing the battle to quit smoking.

*I took that pretty blue scarf in my hands and killed her with it. And there's nothing else I have to say.*

An old scar on her neck—from a cut when she was seventeen; she often wore scarves to conceal it. The day she'd been killed last September, the scarf she'd worn had been a silk Christian Dior, and the shade of blue was described in the police report as aquamarine.

"She was a goodlooking woman, wasn't she?" Boyle asked.

"I don't remember."

The most recent photos of Anna Devereaux that these two men had seen had been in the courtroom. Her eyes were open, frosted with death, and her long-nailed hand was held outward in a plea for mercy. Even in those pictures you could see how beautiful she was.

"I didn't fool around with her, if that's what you're getting at. Or even want to."

The profiling came back negative for lust-driven killing. Phelan had had normal heterosexual responses to the Rorschach and free association tests.

"I'm just thinking out loud, James. You were walking through the forest?"

"That day I killed her? I got bored with the fair and just started walking. I ended up in the forest."

"And there she was, just sitting there, smoking."

"Uh-huh," Phelan responded patiently.

"What did she say to you?"

"I said, 'Hey.' And she said something I couldn't hear. You read that."

"What else happened?"

"Nothing. That was it."

"Maybe you were mad 'cause you didn't like her muttering at you."

"I didn't care. Why'd I care about that?"

"I've heard you say a couple of times the thing you hate most is being bored."

Phelan looked at the cinder block. He seemed to be counting. "Yeah. I don't like to be bored."

"How much," Boyle asked, "do you hate it?" He gave a laugh. "On a scale of one to—"

"Hell, people don't kill 'cause



hate. Oh, they *think* about killing who they hate, they *talk* about it. But they only kill one kinda person—folks they're scared of." Phelan chuckled softly. "Whatta you hate, detective? Ponder it for a minute. Lotta things, I'll bet. But you wouldn't kill anyone 'causa that. Would you?"

"She had some jewelry on her."

"That's a question?"

"Did you rob her? And kill her when she wouldn't give you her wedding and engagement rings?"

"If she was getting divorced, why wouldn't she give me her rings?"

Homicide had discounted robbery as a motive immediately. Anna Devereaux's purse, eight feet from her body, had contained eleven credit cards and a hundred eighty dollars in cash.

Boyle picked up the manila folder, read some more, dropped it on the tabletop.

Why...

It seemed appropriate that the operative word when it came to James Kit Phelan's life would be a question. Why had he killed Anna Devereaux? Why had he committed the other crimes he'd been arrested for? Many of them gratuitous. Never murder, but dozens of assaults. Drunk-and-disorderlies. A kidnapping that got knocked down to an aggra-

vated assault. And who exactly *was* James Kit Phelan? He'd never talked about his past. Even the *Current Affair* story had managed to track down only a few former cellmates of Phelan's for on-camera interviews. No relatives, no friends, no ex-wives, no high school teachers or bosses.

Boyle asked, "James, what I hear you saying is, you yourself don't have the faintest idea why you killed her."

Phelan pressed his wrists together and swung the chain so that it rang against the table again. "Maybe it's something in my mind," he said after some reflection.

They'd given him the standard battery of tests and found nothing particularly illuminating, and the department shrink concluded that "the prisoner presents with a fairly strong tendency to act out what are classic antisocial proclivities"—a diagnosis Boyle had responded to by saying, "Thanks, doc, his rap sheet says the same thing. Only in English."

"You know," Phelan continued slowly, "I sometimes feel something gets outa control in me." His pale lids closed over the blue eyes, and Boyle imagined for a moment that the crescents of flesh were translucent and that the eyes continued to peer out into the small room.

"How do you mean, James?" The captain felt his heart-rate increase. Wondered: are we really closing in on the key to the county's perp of the decade?

"Some of it might have to do with my family. There was a lot-a crap when I was growing up."

"How bad?"

"Really bad. My papa did time. Theft, domestics, drunk-and-disorderlies. Things like that. He'd beat me a lot. Him and my mother were supposedly this great couple at first. Really in love. That's what I heard, but that's not what it looked like to me. You married, captain?" Phelan glanced at his left hand. There was no band. He never wore one; as a rule Boyle tried to keep his personal life separate from the office.

"I am, yes."

"How long?"

"Twenty years."

"Man," Phelan laughed. "Long time."

"I met Judith when I was in the academy."

"See, after my mother was gone, Papa never had anybody in his life for more'n a year. Part of it was he couldn't never keep a job. We moved all the time. I mean, we lived in twenty states, easy. You don't transfer round much in your line of work, bet."

"Lived three miles from here, in Marymount, going on twenty-one years."

"I've been through there. Pretty place. I lived in plenty of small towns. It was tough. School was the worst. New kid in class. I always got the crap beat out of me. Hey, that'd be one advantage, having a old man who's a cop. Nobody'd pick on you."

Boyle said, "That may be true, but there's another problem. I've got my share of enemies, you can imagine. So we keep moving the kids from one school to another. Try to keep 'em out of public schools."

"You send 'em to private?"

"We're Catholic. They're in a parochial school."

"That one in Granville? That place looks like a college campus. Must set you back some. Man."

"No, they're up in Edgemont. It's smaller, but it still costs a bundle. You ever have kids?"

Phelan put on a tough facade. They were getting close to something. Boyle could sense it.

"In a way."

Encourage him. Gentle, gentle.

"How's that, James?"

"My mama died when I was ten."

"I'm sorry."

"I had two little sisters. Twins. They were four years younger'n me. I pretty much had to take care of them. Papa, he ran around a lot, like I was

saying. I sorta learned what it was like to be a father by the time I was twelve."

Boyle nodded. He'd been thirty-six when Jon was born. He still wasn't sure he knew what it was like to be a father. When he told Phelan this, the prisoner laughed. "How old're your kids?"

"Jonathan, he's ten. Alice is nine."

Phelan suddenly grew somber. The chains clinked.

"See, the twins, they were always *wanting* something from me. Toys, my time, my attention, help 'em read this, what does this mean? . . . Jesus."

Boyle noted the anger on the face. Keep going, he urged silently. He didn't write any notes, afraid he might break the man's concentration.

"Man, it damn near drove me nuts. And I had to do it all by myself," Phelan spat out. "Papa was always on a date—well, he called 'em dates—or was passed out drunk." He looked up quickly. "Hell, you don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

Boyle was stung by the sudden coldness in the prisoner's voice.

"I sure do," the captain said sincerely. "Judith works. A lotta times I end up with the kids. I love them and everything—just like you loved your sisters, I'm sure—but, man, it takes a lot out of you."

Phelan drifted away for a moment. Eyes as glazed as Anna Devereaux's. "Your wife works, does she? My mother wanted to work, too. Papa wouldn't let her."

He calls his father "papa" but his mother by the more formal name. What do I make of that?

"They fought about it all the time. Once he broke her jaw when he found her looking through the want ads."

*And when she passed me, I hit her hard in the neck, and she fell down.*

"What's your wife do?" Phelan asked.

"She's a nurse. At St. Mary's."

"That's a good job," Phelan said. "My mother liked people, liked to help them. She'da been a good nurse." His face grew dark again. "I think about all those times Papa hit her . . . That's what started her taking pills and stuff. And she never stopped taking 'em. Until she died."

He leaned forward and whispered, "But you know the worst thing?"

"What, James? Tell me."

"See, sometimes I get this feeling . . . I sorta blame it all on my mother. If she hadn't whined so much about getting a job, if she'd just been happy staying home . . . stayed home with me and the girls, then Papa wouldn't've *had* to hit her."

*Then I sat on her and grabbed this scarf she was wearing and pulled it real tight and I squeezed until she stopped moving, then I still kept squeezing.*

"And she wouldn't've started drinking and taking those pills and she'd still be here." He choked. "I sometimes feel good thinking about him hitting her."

*The cloth felt good on my wrists.*

He blew a long stream of air from his lungs. "Ain't a pretty thing to say, is it?"

"Life ain't pretty sometimes, James."

Phelan looked up at the ceiling and seemed to be counting acoustical tiles. "Hell, I don't even know why I'm bringing all this up. It just kinda . . . was there. What was going through my mind." He began to say something else but fell silent. Boyle didn't dare interrupt. When the prisoner spoke again, he was more cheerful. "You do things with your family, captain? That's something I think was the hardest of all. We never did a single damn thing together. Never took a vacation, never went to a ball game."

"If I wasn't talking to you here right now, I'd be with them on a picnic."

"Yeah?"

Boyle worried for a moment that Phelan would be jealous of his family life. But the prison-

er's eyes lit up. "That's nice, captain. I always pictured us—my mother and Papa, when he wasn't drinking, and the twins. We'd be out, doing just what you're talking about. Having a picnic in some town square, a park, sitting in front of the bandshell, you know."

*I kept hearing this music when I cut back the throttle. And I followed it to this park in the middle of town.*

"That what you and your family were going to do?"

"Well, we're unsocial types," Boyle admitted, laughing. "We stay away from crowds. My parents've got a place upstate."

"A family house?" Phelan asked slowly, maybe picturing it. "What's it like?"

"A little shack really. On Taconic Lake. We share it with my brother and his wife. And Mom and Dad, of course."

The prisoner fell silent for some moments, then finally said, "You know, captain, I've got this weird idea." His eyes counted cinder blocks. "We have all this knowledge in our heads. Everything people ever knew. Or'll know in the future. Like how to kill a mastodon or how to make an atom-powered spaceship or how to talk in a different language. It's all there in everybody's mind. Only they have to find it."

What's he saying? Boyle won-



dered. That I know why he killed Anna Devereaux?

"And how you find all this stuff is you sit real quiet and then the thought comes into your head. Just bang, there it is. Does that ever happen to you?"

Boyle didn't know what to say. But Phelan didn't seem to expect an answer.

Outside, in the corridor, footsteps approached, then receded.

*Anyway, what it is, I killed her. I took that pretty blue scarf in my hands . . .*

Phelan sighed. "It's not that I was trying to keep anything from you all. I just can't really give you the kinda answer you want."

Boyle closed the notebook. "That's all right, James. You've told me plenty. I appreciate it."

*I took that pretty blue scarf in my hands and killed her with it. And there's nothing else I have to say.*

"Got it," Boyle announced into the phone. He stood in the dim corridor between the lockup and the interrogation rooms.

"All right!" the district attorney said from the other end of the line. Most of the senior prosecutors had known that Boyle was going to conduct the final interrogation of James Phelan and were waiting anxiously to find out why he'd killed Anna Devereaux. It had become the

question in the prosecutor's department. Boyle had even heard rumors that some guys were running a macabre pool, laying serious money on the answer.

"It's complicated," Boyle continued. "I think what happened was we didn't do enough psychological testing. It's got to do with his mother's death."

"Phelan's mother?"

"Yeah. He's got a thing about families. He's mad because his mother abandoned him by dying when he was ten and he had to raise his sisters."

"What?"

"I know, it sounds like psychobabble. But it all fits. Call Dr. Hirschorn. Have him—"

"Boyle, Phelan's parents are still alive. Both of 'em."

Silence.

"Boyle? You there?"

After a moment: "Keep going."

"And he was an only child. He didn't have any sisters."

Boyle absently pressed his thumb on the chrome number plate of the phone, leaving a fat swirl of fingerprint on the cold metal.

"Boyle?"

Why would Phelan lie? Was this all just a big joke? He replayed the events in his mind. I ask a dozen times to see him. He refuses until just before he's sentenced. He finally agrees. But why?

Why? . . .

Boyle bolted upright, his solid shoulder slamming into the side of the phone kiosk. Then in despair lifted his left hand to his face and closed his eyes. He realized he'd just given Phelan the name of every member of his family. Where Judith worked, where the kids went to school.

Hell, he'd told them where they were right now. Alone, on their way to Taconic Lake.

Wait, calm down. He's locked up. He can't do anything to anybody. He's not getting out—

Oh no . . .

Boyle's gut ran cold.

Phelan's friend. The biker. Boyle had wondered why Phelan had mentioned him. It seemed like a stupid slip at the time, but he realized now that the reference was calculated. He wanted to get the message to Boyle that Phelan knew someone capable of hurting people for money.

"Hey, Boyle, what the hell's going on?"

The captain stared at his distorted reflection in the chrome number pad, realizing at last the enormity of what had happened. It was all a setup. *My mother . . . Papa*. Phelan's emotional confession about his family. Why, Phelan'd been planning it for months. It was why he'd held out saying anything about the motive, to draw Boyle in close, to get the information out of him and to deliver the mes-

sage that his family was in danger.

The sound of chains at night

*You like horror stories, captain?*

The answer to why James Phelan killed Anna Devereaux meant nothing. The question itself was the murderer's last weapon.

He shouted into the phone, "What're Phelan's phone privileges?"

"What?"

"Tell me!" the captain roared.

"Jesus, Boyle. He's got an absolute right to talk to his lawyer. He—"

"Can we stop him?"

"No way. That'd be a due process issue. The appeal'll be pending for months. Years, if the judge okays the injection."

Hell, Phelan could say he was calling the lawyer and make a one minute call to his biker friend, waiting at a pay phone someplace at a prearranged time. He could—

A jingle nearby.

Boyle glanced around, expecting to see the coffee-break cart wheeling toward the guards' locker room. He saw instead James Phelan, flanked by two guards, hanging up a phone in a kiosk across the hall. The ringing was from his wrist chains as they clinked together. The

guards led him back toward the lockup.

Boyle slammed the phone down and, when he got a dial tone, punched in a number. The phone at the lake house began to ring. Five times, six. No one answered.

Boyle watched James Phelan walk into the lockup area as behind him the glass door swung shut with a loud click. Suddenly the prisoner stopped and turned.

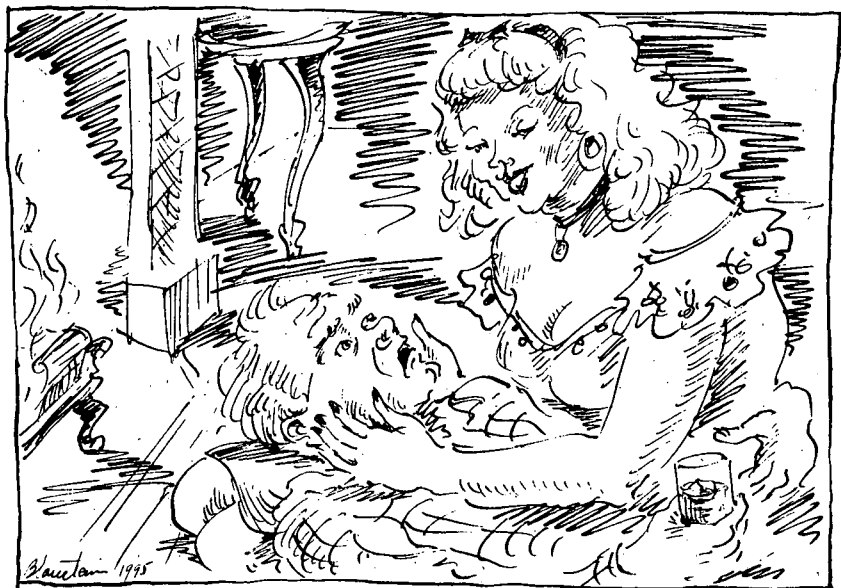
He looked right at Boyle and mouthed something. The captain couldn't hear through the bulletproof glass, but he knew without a doubt that the man had just uttered the word, "Checkmate."

Boyle lowered his head to the receiver and, as if he were praying, whispered, "Answer, please answer," while, far away, the phone rang again and again and again.

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# A LOVE STORY

Jas. R. Petrin



**O**n this particular occasion One Lung Kroeker and me are sitting in the kitchen nook of Donny Rumano's place, which is to say the Brookside Hotel, and we're eating our lunch and trading notions about this and that, and I can see that One Lung has something on his mind. Suddenly he turns his head and coughs loudly for maybe half a minute,

which is a habit he has that earned him his name, and I ask him if his coughing is getting worse. "No," he says as soon as he can speak, "it's getting better." Then he spoons up a large portion of oxtail soup, and holds it in the air, dripping, and asks me if I have ever heard of Mad Hatty Dickinson and her seventeen husband.

Well, I tell him that of course



I've heard of Mad Hatty, that everybody must have heard of Mad Hatty by now, ever since they knock holes in her house not so long ago and find sixteen bodies stashed away here and there about the place, in the walls and floors and basement, and in the front flower garden, and in the attic.

And then I say to him, "What are you talking about, the seventeenth husband?"

One Lung puts down his spoon. "I guess what I'm talking about is the one who got away."

Well, at this I have to lay my own spoon aside and scrutinize One Lung with great interest, because to my recollection there has never been a mention of a seventeenth husband, or for that matter of any husband that got away, all the husbands that notched Mad Hatty's belt being totally present and accounted for by the medical examiner, neatly stored about the premises.

"What do you know about it?" I ask One Lung, and One Lung replies with a mysterious look that he knows lots; and then he takes pity on me and adds the kicker, saying, "I was the seventeenth husband."

"Good grief," I say.

And he tells me about it.

he is doing nothing but cough, drink beer, and listen to the country singer who is moaning and plinking away at a humstrum up on the bandstand. One Lung doesn't think much of this singer or his plinking, and he's giving some thought to heating a penny with a match and potting it down the neck of the singer's shirt, when a female suddenly materializes at his table and leaps toward him with an unlit cigarette between her lips, wanting a light.

Well, of course One Lung gives her a light as he is no fool by any means and he can see that this female is about as fine a looker as any that ever comes into the place, although she's no spring chicken, being many seasons past that, but all the same having a movie star face and a shape to her that doesn't quit.

Now, this woman says her name is Hatty. And before too long they are making small talk between them and having a good laugh at the expense of the country singer, who sings, they both agree, like a cat backing into a blender. She remarks upon One Lung's cough, asking if it's serious, and he tells her that it is very serious indeed, which is the answer he always gives to that question. Her conversation next touches on this and that, and then somehow jumps to One Lung's jewelry, of which, being

**I**t seems that on a certain evening One Lung is sitting in the beverage room of the Brookside Hotel, and

~~~~~ something of a second-story man in his time, he has plenty dripping off of him as usual.

"I spotted this diamond ring of yours the minute I walked in the room," Hatty laughs, holding One Lung's hand in hers so that she can eyeball his dazzler more closely, "right after I heard you cough. And I decided right away you must be rich. Are you?"

"You could say that," One Lung answers, though in fact, except for his jewelry, he is no more rich than a beer waiter.

"What is it like to have money?" Hatty asks, sighing and pressing her leg tight against him.

"Oh, it's a fine situation," One Lung tells her, "except of course that the authorities are always trying to take it away from me and give it to those less energetic than myself."

"I know just what you mean," Hatty says, "I am always having to keep an eye out for the authorities myself." And they go on talking and it seems that they are most sympatico indeed, and they chat a little more, and the time passes by, and the next thing One Lung knows, the lights are being dipped and she is giving his hand a final squeeze, saying, "You've been very nice, but now I must be getting along." Then she bites her lip and adds, "Of course, if you

were to see me home, we could have a cobbler or two there as a nightcap."

One Lung likes the sound of this, even though he much prefers beer to cobblers, but he is not much of a lady's man and doesn't have enough beer in him yet to be forcing his hand in this matter, and so he says that it has been very nice meeting her, that he will take the idea under serious consideration, and that they most certainly should get together again very soon and see how it all works out.

"Yes," she says, "we should." And giving him a disappointed look, she gets up and legs it for the door.

In order to reach the door, she must pass the bandstand, and while she is passing the bandstand, a strange thing happens. She appears to mention something or other to the country singer, who immediately turns as red as a steamed lobster and starts roaring at the top of his lungs. Now this is most unseemly behavior in One Lung's view, and he feels compelled to come to the aid of his new lady friend, which he does, straightening the singer out with a slap from the business end of the fellow's very own hum-strum, which is not one of those hollow cowboy-type hum-strums that don't hurt much, but one of





those heavy electric ones that is made from a solid block of ash and is about as stiff as a cricket bat. The country singer falls down, several patrons applaud, and One Lung escorts Hatty from the premises.

Outside Hatty begs One Lung to walk her all the way home, since, as she tells him, there are plenty of other country singers here and about in the town and it's impossible to say when one of them might emerge and start hollering at you. And she adds that in any case her house is only a few blocks away, and that she still has those cobblers in mind. So they walk along together chatting about one thing or another, and One Lung finds Hatty to be nice company indeed, and he has a very pleasant time of it the entire distance.

Hatty's house turns out to be a prime and imposing whack of carpentry that One Lung has noticed and admired on previous occasions. It is without question the finest house in the neighborhood, being large and presentable with a long front porch for lounging on in the summer and a deep, wide yard with burgeoning rosebushes in front and a location which is not much more than a stroll from the beverage room and off-sale beer store of the Brookside Hotel. One Lung jokingly remarks that it appears

to be Hatty and not him who is rich.

"Well, Mr. Kroeker," she replies, "I'm a widow. And widows have to do what they can to get by. They've had to do so down through the ages, and it's no different now. But," she says, "this house is all paid for, and the furnishings are all mine, and of course there is the insurance and the bank account that my last husband left me." Here she gives his arm a squeeze, adding, "Speaking of which, do you happen to have any insurance yourself?"

One Lung can't help but tell her that he is so completely flush with insurance that his death will in all probability bring about a world-wide collapse of the insurance industry, although the fact of the matter is the only insurance he has at the moment is a collision policy on an aging pickup truck, and this policy has a deductible so large he may as well not have any insurance at all. But One Lung is a very convincing individual, and Hatty seems perfectly satisfied and pleased by his answer, and she takes him straight into the house for a cobbler or two.

Here I let One Lung know that I'm curious about a house where sixteen husbands have been snuffed out. I imagine it to be all

cobwebs and gloom. But One Lung enlightens me quickly:

"It was a fine and cosy place," he says, "with great warm rooms, and furniture of the very best kind, although it did have female touches here and about, such as fresh flowers in a vase, and lace doilies on the backs of the chairs, and newspapers folded up and stowed neatly away out of reach." And he adds wistfully, "But there was a fireplace, and a sofa to stretch out on in front of the fire, and in the kitchen there was a fridge so large it could accommodate many boxes of product from the Brookside beer store without any strain whatsoever."

There's a catch in his voice at this point, and I can see that old One Lung is very sentimental about the subject because his eyes mist over and he turns away and coughs so vigorously that I am afraid he may burst a blood vessel and bleed on things. But he recovers after a moment and continues.

Hatty rounds up sandwiches, lays on a fire, and mixes them a couple of large coffee cobblers. She invites One Lung to recline on the sofa with his head in her lap and relate his life history to her. But since the life history of One Lung Kroeker is not a history well suited to pretty women in front of fires, but a history more suited to judges in front of

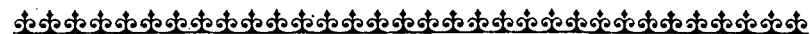
juries, he makes a new history up on the spot especially for female consumption. This is a history filled with uplifting sentiments, heroic acts, and lengthy exotic voyages—although the only voyage I am aware that One Lung ever makes is a three day excursion to the Shooting Star Casino in Minnesota, and I hear that before he is there three hours the Indians that run the place put him on a northbound bus with his arm in a splint and specific instructions not to return.

At about this time One Lung notices that he is coughing more than ever, and he begins to wonder if this may have something to do with the coffee cobblers.

But he doesn't wish to mention this to Hatty, of course, and besides he's used to coughing, and so he goes on entertaining her, dwelling upon the ways in which he got rich, and the places where he got rich, and how most people do not even know that he is rich because except for his jewelry he keeps a low profile and does not flash his money around. It seems Hatty likes the get-rich parts best and makes him go over them again several times.

I break in on One Lung to ask him just where the dead husbands enter in.

"At that time I have no idea



about the dead husbands," One Lung confides. "I only know that I am coughing a lot, and I discover that the coffee cobblers must be truly triple-blitzers because almost before I realize it there is daylight spilling in the windows, and I'm tiptoeing down the stairs with my shoes in my hand, and there is a robin in the front yard bawling so loudly it is practically knocking my head off. And as I go out the gate the bedroom window slides back and Hatty puts her head out and smiles and says sweetly, 'See you this evening, handsome.'"

"She called you that?"

"Certainly."

Now, of all the descriptions I can imagine being applied to One Lung, "handsome" is not one that rises naturally to the top of my mind. I decide that Hatty Dickinson must have been affected more than a little by the cobblers herself, or that maybe she is not as bright as One Lung states, or that she requires corrective lenses or even cataract surgery.

But she finds him handsome enough to suit her, apparently, because that very evening she and One Lung do get together again, and in fact they get together every evening for the next several weeks.

In fact, they grow very close, although there are some unset-

ling features about their relationship. For one thing, One Lung's cough is beginning to get very much worse. Also, from time to time Hatty's telephone rings and the caller is apparently some male individual Hatty has had quite enough of, for she always slams down the receiver in disgust. One Lung offers to take a more convincing tone with this caller, perhaps paying him a personal visit if need be, but Hatty says this will not be necessary, that the caller is simply a previous suitor who will eventually grow tired of pester-ing her.

So except for these distractions, their evenings are very pleasant. They follow a comfortable format. A few beers at the Brookside Hotel, followed by cobblers in front of Hatty's fire, while One Lung goes on coughing a lot and tiptoeing out of the house in the wee hours past a roaring robin.

I begin to think it will go on forever (One Lung says), but that's not to be. One evening Hatty doesn't wish to visit the Brookside. Instead she insists that we begin drinking cobblers early in front of her fire. And so I am lying with my head in her lap, coughing and trying to wrap up a story about how I almost singlehandedly develop the tourism industry on the south coast of Mexico, when Hatty

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suddenly takes my face in her hands and fixes her large eyes upon me. "Krokey," she says, "I've decided! Let's get married!"

Her proposition stops me cold. I'm dead in the water halfway between Mazatlán and Acapulco. I stare up at her and see that she is eyeballing me like a priestess at the top of a Mayan pyramid. I cannot think of a single thing to say on my own behalf. I just lie there feeling as if a Mexican bus has rolled over me, and when my brain finally starts rotating again, my first thought is to make a run for it, but I fear I'm too full of beer and coffee cobbler for that, and besides she's still gripping my head between her hands. And then she makes an even more astonishing remark.

"When you popped the question on me last night, Krokey," she says, "I was a little uncertain. But I've had all day to think about it, and it seems to me now that you're right. It's the best thing for us. You do love me as much as you said, don't you, dear?"

One Lung informs me that at this point he breaks into a sweat. This sweat is accompanied by a fierce bit of coughing which turns him red and then purple, and makes the veins stand out on his neck, and he very much desires a glass of Brookside beer to ease his

throat and mind. But Hatty is holding onto him and staring down at him expectantly, and he hears himself gasp the reply she is waiting for, which is something like, yes, yes, yes, or noises to that effect.

"Well then," she says, "it's settled."

And with that she drags him into the kitchen and sits him down. She gets on the horn to a certain justice of the peace in St. Andrews, or some such patch, and it turns out that this J.P. is nobody but her own loving brother. She jaws away at him, getting mad, frowning and hollering a lot, then slams the phone down and comes and plunks herself in One Lung's lap and informs him that her loving brother will be very pleased to show up later that evening and perform a civil ceremony. And then she happily commences chewing on One Lung's ear.

"Well," One Lung tells me, "my mind is reeling. I'm wondering what on earth I have said while I am under the influence of cobblers and beer, and I'm trying mightily to work out how I can extricate myself before this brother shows up with all the powers that are invested in him."

"Why don't you just tell Hatty no?"

"It's not that simple. At the



same time I'm asking myself whether I ought to extricate myself, I'm also asking myself whether I want to extricate myself, what with the bank account Hatty has inherited, and the insurance money, and the excellent cobblers, and the fine and comfortable house which is all paid for and is only a skip and a jump from the beverage room of the Brookside Hotel."

I believe it will more likely be a lurch and a stumble in One Lung's case, but I nod sympathetically. The concerns he expresses are quite understandable.

"Of course," he says then, "I don't yet know what's hidden behind the walls or buried in the flower garden. But after all, what you don't know don't hurt you."

I raise my eyebrows at this.

Well, it seems that while they are waiting for the loving brother to show up, One Lung is not encouraged to hang about the place, Hatty telling him that it's more fitting he spend his last few hours of single life with his friends, if he has any, but that he is to return by no later than ten o'clock that evening dressed in a clean shirt and tie and also a suit.

So she chases me out (One Lung says). I go home and get dressed as instructed. Then I scout around a bit and discover

Henton, Tommy Hightops, and La-La Lloyd Laduc all playing whisky poker up in Henton's apartment. They are impressed by my finery and ask me if I have got a job selling cars. When I tell them the good news, they are all very excited and happy for me and almost look up from their cards, Henton saying, "Great," Hightops saying, "Fine," and La-La Lloyd saying, "So does this mean you're going to stand the drinks or just what?"

I see that standing drinks is something expected of a groom-to-be, and so I go down and fetch a large box of beer out of my truck. They make faces when they see it because these are guys who like their drinks hard, and the harder the better, but since they've drunk up everything hard in the place by this time, except for maybe the Lysol, they are receptive to my offer. And so we all drink beer and play whisky poker together until finally La-La Lloyd says to me:

"Your coughing does seem to be a whole lot worse, One Lung. Perhaps this romance doesn't agree with you."

I tell him it agrees with me fine.

"Are we invited to the wedding?" he asks.

I tell him that unfortunately it will be a private ceremony.

“Well,” he says, “then you won’t mind if, after the ceremony is completed, we stop by this fine house with the large fridge. After all, we’d like to give your new bride our best wishes.”

Naturally I’m not at all in favor of this, Hatty having given me explicit instructions which do not include visitors. But La-La Lloyd is insistent, and the others are both getting into it, and pretty soon they are all bellying that with or without me they will go and pay their respects.

“All right,” I say, “fine. But don’t come round before midnight. Give me time to grease the skids. And if you find the lights out when you arrive, you must go away and leave us in peace.”

I figure this arrangement is the best I can get. By this time it is past nine o’clock, and so I say goodnight to them and hurry downstairs to my truck.

When I arrive back at Hatty’s, I am surprised to discover the place lit like a lightbulb maker’s convention. I find that Hatty is all dolled up, and I see that her loving brother has arrived. This is an individual who is a sight to behold, with a long dark coat and black tie, and the manner of a man who is likely to keep a howitzer primed and handy in order to settle any differences of opinion regarding his sister’s

virtue. But he gets about his business, and before I know it he has whisked out a cue card, joined our two hands, and is making the appropriate noises. A moment later he pronounces us married.

“But what about the ring?”

“We use my ring.”

“The blood test?”

“He has a blank form he fills in.”

“And the witnesses?”

“He says he will locate a witness later.”

“Well then,” I say, “I suppose that’s that.”

“Yes.”

When the loving brother leaves, Hatty tells One Lung how much this brother means to her and how proud she is that he has raised himself up to be a justice of the peace after some earlier unpleasantness where it is alleged he practically beats a prospective husband of Hatty’s to death regarding some untruthful statements this individual makes about his eligibility. From this I see that I’ve assessed the loving brother’s disposition correctly.

Then (One Lung says) Hatty makes a couple of cobbles which we drink before the fire, and this time after my first gulp I cough for almost five minutes. Hatty is pretty much ignoring my cough, acting very businesslike and asking pointed





questions between my outbursts about exactly how much money and jewelry and insurance I actually do have, and also putting other embarrassing questions concerning the addresses of banks and the numbers of accounts and all that. I'm beginning to sweat because I have no such information to give. She's got my face in her hands again and is holding me in such a way as to be able to pull my ears off if she takes the notion, and I'm coughing away and getting very concerned about it when suddenly there's a knock on the door.

Fine, I think. Great. This is Henton and friends.

But when I get up to open the door, I find only a vaguely familiar face gazing back at me. It's the face of an individual I have seen before, but who I have difficulty placing. The mystery is cleared up when the individual opens his coat and reveals to me a snap-up denim cowboy shirt, along with a very large double-barreled shotgun-type cannon leveled at my midsection. I see then that he's no other than the country-singing hum-strummer that I last see sprawled on the floor of the Brookside Hotel with an egg on his head.

"Who is it, Krokey dear?" Hatty calls out. Hum-Strum marches straight on into the house, herding me ahead of him with

his gun barrel as if I am a cow or a sheep. "So," he hollers, seeing Hatty on the sofa in her finery, "Krokey dear, is it? I'll give you 'Krokey dear'! I'll give you both 'Krokey dear'!"

And—snick-snick!—he pumps a shell into the breech of his armament.

It's an intolerable situation. I see that I will have to do something very quickly about this visitor or he is liable to blast large holes all round and about, and ruin the furniture, and so I say to him, "What's the idea?"

"What's the idea?" he shouts back. "What's the idea? I'll tell you what's the idea! The idea is to blow the two of you to bits! It's bad enough you whack me with my guitar last time I see you, which, by the way, is a highly collectible old Gibson Les Paul flame-top—or should I say was? Do you know what you've done to the intonation? Do you know what you've done to the relief? But the last straw is how you move in on my wife. Hatty and I are married! Isn't that so, dear?"

Naturally I'm pretty well flabbergasted by this statement. I realize that he must be the male individual who phones her so often. But until now I am not even aware that Hum-Strum and Hatty have a nodding acquaintance, let alone—well, you can imagine what's going through

my mind. The next thing I'm wondering is how many cobblers Hum-Strum has consumed on this very sofa, before this very fire.

Well, as I say, Hum-Strum is highly emotional. And I'm plenty agitated myself. But I'm also plenty impressed by the fact that Hatty is not even breathing hard. She is as cool as a Brookside beer fridge and slowly gets to her feet, glaring disdainfully at Hum-Strum up the length of the long-barreled howitzer as if it is a broom handle, and says to him firmly in a tight, cool voice:

"You lied to me, Murray."

"I did not lie to you," he says.

"You told me," Hatty goes on, "that you had a large fortune left to you by your father from the sale of his ranch."

"And that's true!"

"Then right after we are married, sitting in this very room, you admit to me that you are totally broke."

"But that's also true. I did inherit a fortune. And I am broke. I lost all my money on the trotters at the Downs. I'd of told you that before the wedding if you'd asked me. But you didn't. Now none of that matters. Your brother married us. You are my wife!"

"No," she says, "I'm not! The marriage has never been consummated!"

Now while they are tossing

the rag back and forth like this, I am watching for a chance to dive through a window. Or, failing that, at least a chance to disarm Hum-Strum, as I perceive that his bazooka is wavering uncertainly this way and that.

But also I'm listening to Hum-Strum's argument, and I perceive that he is offering me an excuse and opportunity to withdraw from my own marriage to Hatty. After all, if he is married to her, how can I be? And if he isn't, then I'm not either, on account of the fact that our marriage also has not yet been consummated—unless it can be argued that it was consummated early. And so I see a glimmer of hope. I see that maybe I will remain a bachelor. I see that perhaps I can resume my happy life, provided that in the process I don't get a hole blown in me large enough to push a beer tray through.

"Throw this bum out," Hum-Strum orders Hatty, "so that you and me can be cosy again."

"No," she says, "I won't."

"Why not?" he asks.

"Because," she says. "He's my husband."

"Impossible. Besides, you said you loved me."

"I did."

"You can't stop loving someone just because they're broke."

"Yes, I can."



"And you can't go on out and marry somebody else just because you happen to feel like it. Like this bum."

"I just did," she says.

"All the same," Hum-Strum tells her, "the marriage is not legal. And if you won't toss him out, you leave me no choice. I'm going to use this thing. Both of you step on over to the door. We're going outside. I don't wish to mess this place up. As your husband, I stand to inherit it."

Well, he marshals us over to the door, and I'm hoping I will be able to make a run for it through the rosebushes although what I would really like to do is pot this guy, as he keeps on calling me a bum, which is most insulting, but at this very instant there's another knock at the door.

Hum-Strum lays his ears back and says to me, "Answer it, you. And no smart stuff. I got an itchy finger." And he pulls Hatty to one side.

Well, I throw open the door, and I can't say who I am expecting at this point—the paperboy, the milkman, the police, I don't know what—but who do I find out there on the porch, grinning at me out of the night, but Henton, Tommy Hightops, and La-La Lloyd Laduc.

"Where is the bride?" Henton says, beaming.

"Oh," I say, taken slightly off

guard. "Her." I feel a poke in my back from the cannon, and I say to them, "I believe she is busy at the moment."

"Busy?" Henton says. "What's she doing? Sawing wood?"

"No," I reply, "she is . . . umm . . . thinking."

Well, by now they are no longer smiling but are gazing at me very suspiciously.

"Are you certain," La-La Lloyd asks me, "that everything's jake inside there?"

I tell him that everything is very jake indeed, that in fact it's entirely copacetic, but apparently I don't convince him, or for that matter any one of them, because at that moment La-La Lloyd, Hightops, and Henton elbow me out of the way and push inside. They get all the way into the room and turn around, and what do they see but Hum-Strum standing next to Hatty with his bazooka pointed at them.

"Who are these birds?" Hum-Strum asks.

"Who are you?" Henton replies.

"I got the gun, I ask the questions," Hum-Strum informs him. "Now then, let's have some answers. You better not be more husbands, I hope?"

"I've never been a husband," Henton informs him, "though I can't speak for these guys. High-



tops, weren't you a husband at one time?"

Hightops stirs his feet and is about to answer when he is interrupted by another knock at the door.

We all look at Hum-Strum. What will he do? The room is getting crowded. But Hum-Strum does not lose his confidence, as he has the bazooka. He motions to me, and I open the door, and in steps Hatty's ever loving brother, the justice of the peace. He is carrying a spade and what looks like a large burlap sack.

"What's going on here?" he says in a gruff voice.

"Nobody knows," I tell him. And to be honest, I am wondering what's going on with him, transporting this equipment.

"Where's Hatty?" he says. And I think he intends to rush to her defense. But suddenly spotting her, he drops the sack, pulls an envelope from his pocket, and starts in on her very angrily, saying, "What are you trying to pull? There is no cash in here. There is only a check that I will bet is not worth the paper it's printed on. You got a nerve playing games with me, Hatty. After all, I know a lot about you!"

"Mind how you speak to my wife," Hum-Strum snaps.

Naturally I can't let this drug-store cowboy outdo me in any way, including making efforts in

the wife-defending department, and so I chime in, saying, "That's right, mind how you speak. She's your sister, after all."

The loving brother lets out a snort. "She's no more my sister than you are. In fact, I was married to her at one time. But now we have a relationship that is strictly hard cash, and I don't mean to be stiffed by a no-good check."

Well, here he starts toward her with the spade in his hand. But as he makes his move, Hum-Strum lets go a load of twelve-gauge shot at the ceiling above his head that just about knocks all our eardrums in. Shattered plaster and dust rain down, and the loving brother halts in his tracks. He stares in disbelief at Hum-Strum.

"You mean you'd shoot the person who administered your sacred vows?"

"Is there anyone better to shoot?" Hum-Strum asks. And then answers himself, saying, "You better believe I will."

"Well, I don't believe it," the loving brother replies.

He takes another step in Hatty's direction, and Hum-Strum promptly pumps the gun—*snick-snick!*—pulls the trigger, and knocks more plaster down on his head. For good measure he pumps again and this time



blasts a yard of carpet off the floor at the loving brother's feet.

We all stand there staring. There is dust everywhere, and the stink of gunpowder, and our ears are ringing. Finally I speak up, saying:

"Well then, Hum-Strum, you have made your point. But that's all you have to say, since I don't believe that you have any pepper remaining in that shaker. You've let off three shots, which accounts for one in the chamber and two in the tube, and that's all you're entitled to with that type of bazooka."

"Unless," La-La Lloyd puts in, "he has illegally pulled the plug, in which case he may still have three shots left."

"Are you willing to gamble on that?" Hum-Strum asks me.

"Well," I reply, "I've gambled on more uncertain things in my time. And I think the odds are in my favor that the plug of that bazooka has not been pulled. So ..."

I make my move on Hum-Strum and instantly the gun goes off again, *ka-wham!*, and this time behind me Hatty's dining room chandelier dissolves into a cloud of shimmering powder.

"Of course," I say, pulling back, "one can make a mistake."

"You don't know just how big a mistake, mister," Hum-Strum says in a nasty tone. And as he

speaks these words I see that he is carefully leveling the long black barrel of his cannon at my breadbasket, his finger slowly tightening on the trigger.

Well, there is little time to think, and no thinking is done. I feel a great rush of sympathy towards myself, and as I am still holding onto my cobbler, I lift the glass to my lips in a final tribute to my memory. But as the cobbler hits my throat, I can't help but burst out coughing, and it's a very severe spasm, and it doubles me over, hacking and gasping. Meantime the gun goes off again, and I have the impression that something large and businesslike, such as a Buick, has rushed past my head. I glance up and see Tommy Hightops leaping forward and knocking the bazooka from Hum-Strum's grasp.

At this development, the loving brother makes his move. He brings his spade up from the floor to Hum-Strum's chin very forcefully, so that it pretty nearly lifts Hum-Strum out of his shoes. Hatty then grabs the shotgun, gives the loving brother a swipe with it, and brings its barrel down with no little muscle on Hum-Strum's bean, knocking him flat. It seems it is Hum-Strum's destiny to keep getting knocked on the bean. By this time La-La Lloyd and Henton have brought out their own

small equalizers, and the four of us make for the door.

Here, One Lung goes back to eating his oxtail soup.

"Well," I say, prompting him.

"Well what?"

"Well, what happens next?"

One Lung shrugs.

"I don't see anything of what happens next, as the four of us beat it from the place very rapidly. But the last thing I notice is that Hatty is still in possession of the bazooka, her husbands, Loving Brother and Hum-Strum, sprawled at her feet, making it clear to the rest of us that it would be a mistake to intrude further on this domestic disagreement."

"But aren't you a husband, too?"

One Lung removes a bone from his mouth and lays it beside his bowl. "That depends how you look at it."

"And how do you look at it?"

"Well," One Lung says, "I look at it this way. Not only is my marriage to Hatty not consummated, but if Hatty's loving brother is not the brother he says he is, then most likely he is not the justice of the peace he says he is, either. And in fact, as it turns out months later, I find that I've had a very close call. I discover why loving brother reappeared at that moment with

the spade. I read in the paper of how Hatty has been turned in by a neighbor who hates and despises her for some time, on account of her roses do so well, and that after some short investigation by the police department, numerous husbands are found here and there in the rose garden and elsewhere about the place. I carry that article with me to this day."

From his wallet, One Lung takes a carefully folded newspaper clipping.

"Does it mention," I ask him, "anything of Hum-Strum and the J.P.?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I never got past myself. I'm too emotional."

I take the clipping from his hand and scan its contents. The last paragraph is very explicit regarding the fate of the husbands, and I let out a large sigh and hand the clipping back to him.

"You're right to suppose you had a narrow escape. It seems that Hatty makes a very clean sweep, except for you."

"Ah," he says. "Yes, I thought that she might." And he coughs a few times. Then he adds, "But she was an excellent wife while it lasted, all the same. Her coffee cobblers were delicious indeed."

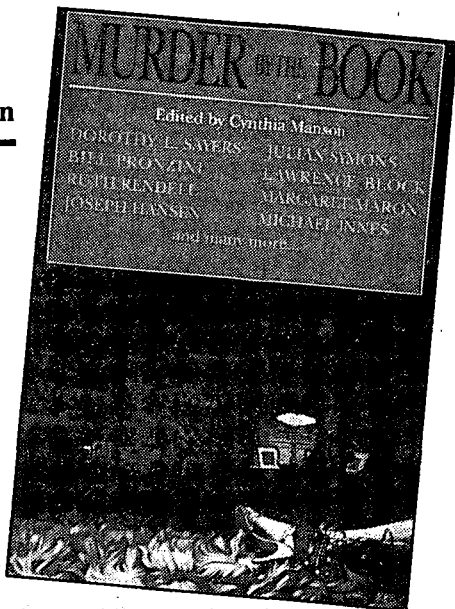


# *Death Between the Covers*

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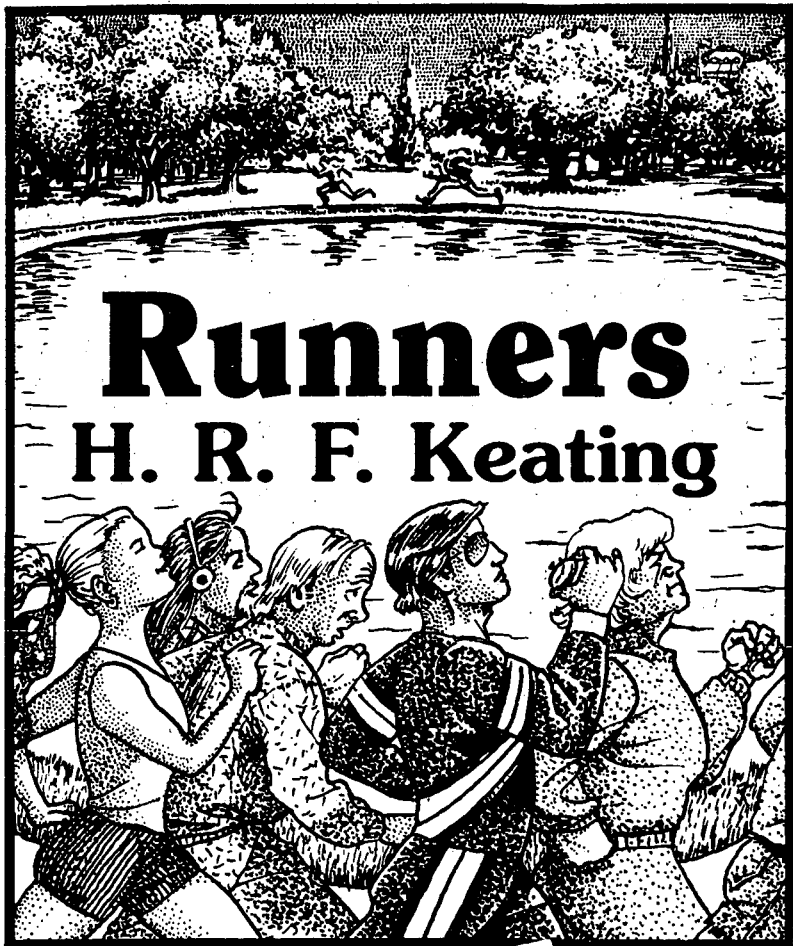
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# Runners

## H. R. F. Keating

**I**t was something Alicia Larmie's brother said to her once when he was down in London that set her off. He was on one of his rare visits to her little Kensington flat—he had some important job in television

in Manchester, she had never quite understood what—and plainly making rather desperate conversation, he had complained about the traffic on the motorway adding, "You can tell a lot about people from the way

they drive." Mostly badly, she had understood.

But it occurred to her next day, as she entered Kensington Gardens for her early morning walk circling the Round Pond, that the same observation might well apply to the runners she saw in the park. Yes, she thought at once, that stocky woman all in blue trotting along with one of her up-and-down, up-and-down hands held in a fist: she's determined to give someone an unpleasant time before the day's out. And that young man with the headphones clamped to his ears, staring mistily at nothing: one of life's utterly self-absorbed. Or the man who passed me just as I came in, the one whose feet were going slap-slap-slap down onto the path with each stride: he's resigned to living set fast in despair.

It became something of a hobby with her, this runner analysis. Almost every morning she added a new example.

The young woman prancing along in a high-cut pair of shocking pink shorts, showing off the entire length of her long, long legs: not exactly there for the exercise. In contrast, the quietly trotting girl in an old pair of gym shorts and a grey top: sensible little thing who, Latin or no Latin, knew the meaning of *mens sana in corpore sano*.

Of course Miss Larmie had never thought of running herself. She would have felt that shorts, whether bright pink or sober blue, were beneath her dignity. Not that she would ever admit, even in thought, to having a dignity to be above anything. On her annual holiday in the Lake District she wore stout jeans for hill walking and thought nothing of it.

But she had a sharply dismissive glance for the young men in the park who seemed unable to take a morning run without kitting themselves expensively out in gleaming white trainers, shiny, multicolored track suits, and, as often as not, large, much-consulted stopwatches. "Making a production of it." Her brother had used the phrase once, and it had stuck in her mind.

So one day when, just after she had noted, bobbing along, a young woman with a mass of blonded hair tied back with an unnecessarily large, diaphanous, scarlet scarf—silly: her one-word appraisal—she saw the two men in trousers and dirty T-shirts running away in the distance, they immediately caught her attention. At once she applied herself to working out what sort of people they must be.

Clearly two of a kind. Although one was tall and heavily

built—he seemed to be the leader—and the other short and inclined to fat, as far as she could see across almost the full width of the Pond it was plain from the curious way they were running that the two of them had very much in common. Their strides were—Miss Larmie knew this, though she could not quite say why—at the same time aggressive and . . . yes, surely, scared.

She actually brought her own brisk walk to a halt and stood looking at them until they disappeared among the trees down near the Albert Memorial. There was definitely something out of place about them. She had seen some curious runners in the park since she had got into this habit of noticing people's styles—the grey-head as trendily garbed as a smart young jogger: quest for eternal youth—but the two in the distance were something new. Weren't those trousers somehow too thick and heavy for running in? Their T-shirts, even at this distance, had looked decidedly the worse for wear. And what did they have on their feet? Impossible to say definitely, far away as they were, but there was certainly no spring in their strides, nothing that bouncy running shoes would impart. So why were they out at this early hour taking exercise? If that was indeed what they were doing.

Eventually in frustration she gave up the puzzle, in much the same way as she occasionally abandoned the *Times* crossword when the clues became too ridiculously involved. Back home to her quick breakfast and then off to work.

She would have thought no more about the two curious runners had it not been for what, next day, she read in the *Times*.  
Pianist Found Murdered

And what a pianist. None other than John Breakspear. The man none of whose London concerts she had ever missed. The supreme interpreter of Brahms and Schumann.

Fiercely Miss Larmie read on down the short half column. John Breakspear, it appeared, had been found early the day before lying dead in the front hall of his house in St. Petersburg Place, a quiet street leading up to the Bayswater Road and Kensington Gardens. A neighbor had heard his doorbell insistently rung at about seven thirty A.M. Then, some five minutes later, the alarm on the outside of the house had been set off, and the neighbor had heard a man, or two men, running down the short path to the road. The crew of a passing police car had stopped for the alarm bell and through the wide-open front door had seen John Breakspear lying in the hall. As soon

as they realized he was dead, with his body bearing the signs of a vicious beating, they had set off to look for his attackers.

When she had read only this much, into Miss Larmie's mind had come the thought of the two runners she had seen on the other side of the Round Pond the day before. She sat still and concentrated.

In her mind's eye she saw the two puzzling runners once more. There had been a plain air of exhaustion in the way they had been striding out, even though they were managing to keep up a somehow aggressive, unflagging pace. And yes, the times fitted. If they were the two men John Breakspear's neighbor had heard hurrying away from his house at about seven thirty-five, it was quite likely that at the Bayswater Road they had snatched at the promise of escape from the distant police car's siren offered by the open gates to the park. Almost certainly then, making their way at that peculiar run of theirs over the burnt-brown summer grass, they would have reached the place on the far side of the Round Pond where she had seen them at the time she herself was where she had been. She could fix that point on her regular perambulation of the Pond to within exactly two minutes each day.

So those two were the men. The murderers.

Rapidly Miss Larmie scanned the rest of the half column. It had been written by the *Times's* crime correspondent—Miss Larmie had never been sure whether she liked that once august journal's having such a person on its staff—and so it contained a few more details of the affair. A man living at an address in St. Petersburg Mews with the same house number as John Breakspear's in St. Petersburg Place had come forward seeking police protection. He had gambling debts and believed the pianist's attackers had intended to come to him. John Breakspear's obituary was on page fifteen.

Before she read that, Miss Larmie went round to the police station in the Earls Court Road. But it was only some weeks later that she received a request to attend an identification parade at the station in Ladbroke Grove. She intimated that the time suggested would be convenient to her and arranged to take the afternoon off from her office. She knew her duty.

She knew it, it proved when the parade took place, rather too well.

As instructed by the Identification Officer in charge of the proceedings, she walked twice along each of two lines of nine

men put in front of her in a big, bare room smelling of the floating dust from a recent hasty sweeping. Each line, it had been explained to her, contained one of the two suspects who had eventually been arrested as known "heavies" from the criminal fringe of the gambling world. She looked man by man at the silently staring faces. She moved her glance from head to foot up and down each of them, and then down to the number chalked on the floor in front.

And she could not in conscience tell herself that any of the men there were the two runners she had seen that summer's morning making their way in such a distinctive manner towards the gates of Kensington Gardens near the Albert Memorial.

"No," she said at last. "No, I cannot really recognize either man."

"You do realize, madam," the Identification Officer said, plainly attempting to conceal a feeling of frustration, "that you are the only witness we have been able to find who can place the two of them at that location at the time in question."

"No. No, I was not aware of that."

The Identification Officer gave a little cough.

"I won't in any way press you, madam," he said, "to agree to

anything against your better judgment. But can I urge you to look at these men once again?"

Miss Larmie thought for a few moments.

"No, inspector," she said eventually. "I have given all the men a most thorough scrutiny, and I cannot say, I cannot say with certainty, I cannot truthfully say at all, that any of them are those men I saw running in the park that morning."

"Very well, madam. If that's your final—"

"No. Stop."

"Yes? You'll have another try?"

"Well, I will. Under certain conditions."

"Conditions? I'm not sure we can agree to any conditions. Parades such as this are conducted according to a strict code of practice."

"So it would not be possible for me to see these men running?"

"Running? To see them running?"

"Yes. You understand, that is how I did see them—if it was them I saw—that morning. And as it happens I am rather—well, rather a connoisseur of runners."

She regarded with equanimity the look of *Jesus*, not another one she had received.

"Perhaps I should explain. I walk in Kensington Gardens

every morning. At a time when there are usually a number of runners there. And I have made a certain study of them, of their way of running, of what that tells one about them. And so when I saw those two men running there that morning I paid particular attention to the way in which they ran. And I think it's possible—only possible, mind—that if I saw all these men actually running I would be able to pick out with some degree of certainty the two I saw at that time."

The *Jesus, not another* look had faded away.

"Well, madam, under the code by which we operate you are permitted to request the members of the parade to move. But—but I'm not sure whether that would extend to running. How—er—far would you want to see them go?"

"Oh, for at least twenty yards. I would need to be able to assess their style."

"Their style?"

"Yes. Yes, inspector, it was their style of running that drew my attention to those two men in the park. Their style."

"I see. Well. Well, I shall have to take advice. Yes, advice. Would you mind waiting for a little?"

"Not at all."

So, nearly an hour later, two lots of nine men, each now with

a sheet of paper tied round his chest with a boldly inked number on it, guarded by half a dozen studiously indifferent constables, ran in turn at a steady pace from one corner of the car park behind the station across to the opposite one.

And when the first lot had completed the course, Miss Larmie said, "Number 4," and when the second lot had done she said, "Number 6."

Then the Identification Officer was unable to restrain a small, tight smile of satisfaction.

Months went by. At last Miss Larmie received notification from the Crown Prosecution Service that she was required as a witness at the Central Criminal Courts on a date in April. She wrote acknowledging the letter and said she would be there.

The morning of the day of the trial was a particularly fine one. Miss Larmie entered Kensington Gardens at her customary hour with perhaps a little more spring in her step than usual. She even conceded that the glittering gilding on the tall black railings of Kensington Palace—why did they need as well a policeman standing guard inside among all the flowerbeds?—which on most mornings, as she passed by, she condemned as decidedly too showy, gave in the



bright sunlight an extra sparkle to the day.

She wondered if she might see a new runner to add to her by now large collection.

And just as she was doing so, she heard coming up behind her the loud steps of a running man. She decided not to turn her head to see him but to try from the sound of his feet alone to make a judgment about him.

Yes, to begin with, the man's steps—she had no doubt from the loudness of them that it was indeed a man coming up quite fast—indicated, surely, someone new to the business of Kensington Gardens running. Their thudding lacked any of the assured regularity of the daily runner. But yes, though heavy, the steps were determined rather than downcast, not at all like the slap-slap-slaps of the man she had long ago analyzed as being set fast in despair. So, a newcomer. And one, yes surely, lacking any sort of sensitivity. Someone, too, who would be determined to gain—

The heavy-thudding runner overtook her.

Yes, certainly a newcomer. Even wearing, this early in the morning, a leather jacket, heavy jeans, and ordinary shoes. A good puzzle here.

And then, instead of thundering on beside the Round Pond,

the man abruptly halted and swung round.

"Want a word wiv you," he said to Miss Larmie.

"With me? I think there must be some mistake."

The man sent a great puff of heavy, exhausted, ill-smelling breath out onto Miss Larmie's face.

"Yeah," he said. "Mistake. That's what there 'as bin. Your mistake, Miss Alice Larmie."

"Alicia," Miss Larmie corrected sharply. Being given the wrong forename was something she particularly objected to.

"Never mind what you call yerself," the man answered, still blocking her way with his broad, swagger-bellied body. "I got something ter tell you. That mistake. The one you made."

"I don't understand a single thing you are saying. Will you please get out of my path."

"What I'm saying is: you made a mistake when you identified two friends of mine back here in Kensington Gardens last summer. A mistake. Understand?"

"I certainly do not understand. I very much doubt if you should be speaking to me about your friends at all. But let me tell you, I certainly did not make any mistake when I identified them as being here in Kensington Gardens at the time I said they were."

The man looked down at her. Another puff of foul, exhausted air.

"But you're going ter say you made a mistake. At the trial at the Bailey today. You're going ter say you got it all wrong. They was never nowhere near 'ere at all."

"I most certainly am going to say nothing of the kind. I made no mistake, and when I am asked, I shall simply tell the truth."

"I wouldn't, not if I was you."

"But you are not me. I strongly suspect you very seldom tell the truth, whereas I am accustomed to do just that."

"That's enough o' your lip. Now, get this. You'll say at the Bailey you never saw my mates that time, or it'll be the worse for you."

He looked at her. As if she was a baffling piece of apparatus, a videoplayer that needed its timeclock changing.

"You know as 'ow they went round ter—" he said before coming to a bewildered halt. "Well, it's like this, see. You know as 'ow they meant ter go round to 'im, feller as wouldn't pay up. Only they got the address a bit wrong. Well, if you don't want what ought ter 'ave 'appened to that feller ter 'appen ter you tomorrow, just do what you're told, orright? Stand up there in the box an' say you made a mistake.

Anyone can make a mistake. An' you did."

With that, the big man brushed past Miss Larmie and set off back towards the entrance to the Gardens she had come in at herself. Still at his awkward, heavy run.

After she had given her evidence at the Central Criminal Court that afternoon, and had dealt calmly with defending counsel's insinuations as to her reliability, Miss Larmie did think to seek out a police officer and tell him about the man who had spoken to her.

"Yes," he said, soothingly, "we do get threats of that nature from time to time. As a general rule that's all they amount to, threats. But I'll get in touch with your local station and arrange some protection, just in case."

Next morning, stepping out of the mansion block at her customary seven A.M., Miss Larmie felt a twinge of shame when she saw that there was a bored-looking constable standing on the pavement there. She crossed the High Street and walked, a little more quickly than usual, up Church Street to the path that led to the entrance to the park beside Kensington Palace.

When she passed the spot where the big man with the unpleasant breath had accosted her, she gave a little shudder

and mended her pace once again. But her circuit of the Round Pond awaited.

It was when she was about halfway round, just by the little wooden shed where a small boat is kept for emergency use, that it happened. Out from the far side of the shed came her tormentor of the day before, and in his hand there was a nasty-looking thick little cosh.

Miss Larmie did not hesitate. The man was still two or three yards away. She wheeled round and took to her heels.

And heard at once on the tarmac of the wide path round the Pond the thud of heavy feet behind her.

For half a minute or so she ran blindly forwards. Anything to get away from that bulky, cosh-wielding figure. Then she began to think. So far, it seemed, she had been able to keep far enough ahead. It was plain from the day before that the man behind was hardly in training, while she herself, toughened by hard walking up the Lake District fells, was always in excellent condition.

But if the man was really determined, he might be able to put on a desperate spurt and catch her. He was tall. His legs must be a good deal longer than her own.

And there was nobody about. There seldom was on this side of

the Pond at this early hour. She could shout while she still had the breath. But it was by no means certain that any of the runners plodding or steaming along the Broad Walk away at the other side of the Pond would hear her. Or take any notice if they did. She knew all about the impenetrable aura runners were apt to wrap themselves in.

So nothing for it but to do what she could to put as much distance as possible between herself and the man with the cosh.

Until . . .

She set herself a good steady fast pace. Behind she could hear the thud of pursuing feet. But the occasional grunts of effort that had come to her ears at the beginning of the chase were no longer audible. She hoped this meant she was far enough ahead. She did not dare slow her run by glancing back to see, even for a moment.

They rounded the Pond. Still no one particularly near. Only a single runner, a young enough man, heading up the Broad Walk away towards the Elfin Oak at the other end of the Gardens. And even at a distance, she could see the earphones clamped to his head. Another Mr. Self-absorbed.

No, nothing for it but to hope her plan would work.

Reaching the strip of browned

grass between the Pond and the Broad Walk, she did dare for one instant to glance back. When the sound of heavy steps on tarmac was no longer there, she would not know what the situation was. She saw now that as a runner she was in distinctly better shape than the big man. He was more than ten yards behind.

Too much?

She forced herself to slacken her pace, and when her pursuer reached the Broad Walk and his steps could be heard again on the hard surface, she guessed he was a yard or two closer.

On she ran. Down the incline beyond the Broad Walk and onwards.

And then, yes. She flung herself against the tall railings of the palace and called out, with all the remaining breath in her lungs, to the policeman still there on the far side.

"Officer, this man is threatening me."

The big man came to a halt, gasping for air. He was just six or seven yards away. He looked at her. He looked at the high railings with their glittering gilt tops. He looked at the policeman

guarding the royal personages within.

The policeman had pulled a radio from his belt.

The big man wheeled round, dropped the little cosh he had not ceased to grasp, and shot off, though at a wretched, lumbering pace.

"I think you should say on your radio, officer, that he's making for the Queen's Gate," Miss Larmie called out, breathing back to normal.

It was well into the autumn when Miss Larmie received another notification to attend the Central Criminal Court, where a man, identified from his sweaty fingerprints on the cosh he had dropped, was to be tried for committing Affray under the Public Order Act 1986.

She attended, gave her evidence in an admirably concise manner, and saw her would-be assailant sent to prison. But after this, in the mornings in Kensington Gardens, she no longer attempted to analyze the personalities of the runners who plodded or skimmed, pelted or bowled along, darted past or trotted by.

FICTION

# MOLLY


Robert Halsted



Illustration by Mark Penta

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/96



**M**olly was in my dreams again last night. Considering how little I dream these days, or at least how little of my dreams I remember, this seems very significant. Add to that that I have only now, in the last few days, put together the final bits of the story, though I've had the basic facts of it since long before Pearl Harbor.

And then, I am dying-age now, probably the last survivor of those who were close to the event. Not that I couldn't have died at any time during the past several decades, nor that I have the slightest present intention of doing so, but this is a credible time for it, and as convenient for all concerned as any before or since.

So, armed with an imaginary immunity I never needed, I decide that it's time to tell the whole story.


Molly was a sweet, demure, and tractable child. Not that she was a two-dimensional goody-goody lacking in the impish, even naughty, charm I still find attractive in little girls and pretty women; she had mischief in her, but never malice. She was a nice person.

She must have been a year or two older than I. I remember waiting afternoons for her to get home before I started school, and then another season there was when we walked to school and back together—the John R. Lewis Elementary School—so I must have been six when she Went Away.

Many of my memories of her, after many years and a change of eras, are bound to be confabulations, bits of recall mixed with fantasies and reconstructions, but even these, I have no doubt, carry the authority of True Myth, their historical reality insignificant beside the greater truths they convey.

We grew up, in the few years we shared, a few doors down and across the street from each other, and while her greater age gave her certain privileges I didn't yet have, it never raised any of the barriers that are spaced so close together in childhood. We were first and foremost comrades.

Being a child in Fort Nolan back in the Great Depression of the thirties was like no experience an American child could have today. We had few of the modern amusements for distraction. We had ourselves and each other and the great world around us, and I think I was fortunate in my choice of family and neighbors. I had a mother who did nice things in the kitchen and a father from whom I acquired what I have in the way of a work ethic and sense of crafts-



manship. I had a grandfather who told me about the distant hills and the names of constellations and far galaxies, lying on a pallet in the yard of a summer's night. An uncle showed me the ways of ants and butcherbirds and horned toads, and how to use a soldering iron.

Mostly I had Molly. We roamed our neighborhood on the edge of town—it was still the edge of town when I went back a few years ago—together, knowing the limits though I don't recall ever hearing them defined: behind Molly's house we went across the fields as far as the bob-wire fence, as we called it; as far as Locust Street on the south; westward past Joyce Ann's house to the wooden bridge; and to the cottonwood tree where the little creek, often dried to a series of pools, crossed the sloping field north of my house. We weren't permitted to go to Bobby Lee's house—he could come to ours, but his brother couldn't—and no power could have forced us to pass the two and a half story, long-unpainted, Victorian house where the Old Witch lived.

Within this broad realm lay an infinity of treasures. There was vacant lot after vacant lot, each one a botanical and zoological garden in its own unique way. On the more barren spots we might find a fragment of quartz or mica and convince ourselves it was a diamond. I didn't know what diamonds were, but I accepted on Molly's authority, sure she would never deceive me, that they were desirable.


There was a vacant house around the corner and down the block that no one thought was haunted. It had been started just before the Depression came and never inhabited. The back door stood open unless some grownup noticed and closed it. We were all forbidden to go into it, of course, so naturally it became a clubhouse. Looking back, I think the grownups must have known this.

In the girls' space were bits of falling-apart furniture in adult and child sizes, a mismatched set of dolls' china for tea parties, and the stub of a broom they used conscientiously.

The back room that was boys' territory was much less graciously furnished but contained such valuables as a jackrabbit's skull, a rusty gear wheel somebody might could make something with, and a skin shed by a snake, almost entire, that was sometimes used to frighten the girls. I liked girls and spent as much time in their domain as in the boys'.

On days that were grey or chilly or too windy, Molly and I might go there to play house. Sometimes I was the daddy and sometimes the little boy, but Molly was always the wife and mother. Which





she, in her gentle warmth, should by all that is right have lived to be.


I liked Molly's family, mostly. Her mother's cooking was different from my mother's, but good. Her father was a little stiff and formal, and for a while intimidated me, but he doted on Molly and accepted me as an extension of her, and he was a gentle man. He worked every day, wore a coat and tie, and took me as seriously as if I were a grownup.

The only member of the family I didn't like—and not just because Molly disliked him—was her Uncle Teddy, her mother's much younger brother who was the black sheep of the family. He had been in the CCC—someone suggested as an alternative to reform school—and still wore parts of the uniform. He had unpleasant ways of teasing children. Like many people we knew, he made home brew. Daddy did, too, sometimes—people started doing it during Prohibition and kept on during the Depression. Nora Southworth, Molly's mother, disapproved and made Teddy keep his brewing operation in the back of the garage.

Our last day together was a hot Saturday. Saturday, because my father, who had a job, worked till noon on Saturday, and from lunch onwards it was a family day at our house. Molly, with her virtual sister status, had lunch with us, and then Mother sent her home with a pat on the bottom. I'm sure it was hot because instead of playing in the open Molly and I had lain on the shady side of her house, our bare legs and arms cool in the grass. Her house was two stories tall and cast a longer shadow than ours. We gazed up at the cotton-white cloud puffs against the sharp blue sky and looked for faces and castles and animals in them as she had taught me to do.

I clung to that last lazy day with Molly for . . . well, as many years as from then to now. Her tanned legs between yellow sunsuit and noisy sandals, her fluffy brown hair half wilted by the heat, the final headturning and wave as she smiled her last farewell and walked homeward from my house.

After that we had a bigger than usual family Saturday. My grandparents came in from the ranch and Daddad took me to Canfil's drugstore for a double dip chocolate ice cream comb as I still called them, while Grandmother started supper and Mother and Daddy went to the Piggly Wiggly to do the week's shopping. After an early supper, we all went to the Texas Theatre for a movie before the



price went up from a quarter to thirty-five cents for grownups. Children's price was always a dime.

It was late for me but early for grownups when we got home. It was high summer, and I remember the edge of the sky being still purplish with specks and streaks of cloud the dark red color of nearly cold embers.

Almost as soon as the lights were on, the telephone rang. My parents always managed somehow to come up with the two dollars a month the phone cost—partly, I learned years later, because I had once turned very sick in the middle of the night and they “nearly lost” me before a doctor could be found.

What followed was to my young mind then, and still is, a jumble of events. Mother answered the phone, I heard her say Nora's name, and then immediately a frown clouded her face. She put one hand over the mouthpiece and sent my grandfather and me back to the car to look for something.

I was shuttled hither and yon, in a sequence I never pieced together afterward—into the kitchen with Grandmother, off for a bath though I'd had one a few hours earlier, into my bedroom with the door closed.

There were comings and goings, neighbors' voices, doors opening and closing. I heard Mr. Gambill's old Model T—it had its own peculiar sound—chugging by in ultra-slow motion. When I pressed my face to the window screen and looked out, I saw dark figures with flashlights swinging in slow arcs, a kerosene lantern held high, another car crawling along on the next street.

What I was feeling by then wasn't so much panic or garden-variety fear as something slower and darker and deeper. I knew something was wrong, wronger than anything that had ever been near me before. I couldn't have put it into words at that age, but my fear wasn't an immediate one for myself, rather more like a dread for something in the future.

Had any adult been wise enough to give me the facts, I could have handled them. What frightened me was the unknownness of whatever it was that needed fearing. I could even, I discovered later, have shortened the search time by an hour or so had they asked me.

I was too exhausted to stay alert and too disturbed to go to sleep. Eventually my mother came in and told me I was going back to the ranch with my grandparents.

“Can Molly come?” I asked drowsily.

I think she replied, "No, darling, she can't come this time."

Too tired to protest, I let myself be carried, draped over Daddad's shoulder, and laid on the shelf behind the seat of their Model A coupe. That was the last summer I was small enough to fit there. I liked the ranch, there were a million interesting things to explore, but I didn't like to go by myself. I had to sleep alone in a room that wasn't my own, and the night sky through the window looked very lonesome without the soft glow of the town lights, all cold stars and sometimes the glaring moon. One night a hoot owl in the big mesquite tree by the windmill terrified me, and I ran squalling into the kitchen where the grownups were still up.

This night Grandmother tucked me in and, sleepy as I was, insisted on hearing my prayers while she clasped my hand. She squeezed hard when I got to "if I die before I wake," and again when I got to Molly in my blessings. She kissed my hand when I finished, which she'd never done before in my memory, and left the room without another word. She left the door open a crack. I realize now she had been sobbing.

It was gloom more than fear, and certainly not the country night sounds—I think I would have welcomed an owl or coyote for company—that kept me half awake. Then I felt Molly crawl into the bed with me. We always did this, though for reasons only grownups understood we were supposed to be in separate beds when we spent nights together. Then she would go back to her bed, or sometimes I back to mine, before the grownups woke.

Despite the summer heat, she was cold. She hugged me hard—Molly was exempt from my budding machismo that repelled demonstrative affection—and said, "I have to go now. I won't see you for a while, but I'll be back." Then she was gone.

I spent a little while puzzling how she had got there, why she had to leave, how she got so cold on a night when I'd kicked my covers off. Perhaps I thought she had walked all those miles in the dark, or perhaps that was an adult afterthought.

When I got home several days later, Molly had been buried, of course. Mother tried to explain her death to me, and I kept asking when she would be back. Finally Mother told me that God had taken her away to Heaven, and she was never coming back to Fort Nolan any more. That engendered in me a distrust in, a disapproval of, the Deity that has never left me since.

\*

I didn't see Molly again till well into autumn, though she had whispered in my ear in the dark a few times.

I was often called a little pitcher with big ears, not without reason. By this time I had gathered that something terrible had been done to Molly, though she never spoke of it, and that the police had decided it was a hobo who did it. We saw many of them in those Depression days, drifting through the countryside, knocking on back doors to exchange menial labor for food or, as winter came on, for castoffs.

It must have been sometime in November. We were still having a hot day now and then, but nothing much had leaves left on it, and the frost had added its touch to the drought-browned Bermuda grass of our lawn, leaving a dry grey carpet crumbling over the hard soil. It had been long enough since that night that I was no longer restricted to my own yard, but if I went farther than Billy Hooper's house, there was always a duenna with me.

Molly was standing at the back of our car in the dirt driveway. It was turning dusk, and I had to move closer to be sure she was there.

There had never been need for much greeting ritual between us. She smiled, and I went to her. I do remember that, at that first sight, she looked bedraggled; perhaps I later added the details of dirt smears, torn dress, and bruised throat. I certainly had this image in my mind, though, before I made the pilgrimage back to Fort Nolan and looked through all the records.

She hugged me, a soft spring-zephyr hug. She took hold of my hand and squeezed it and I squeezed hers back. She didn't seem as cold as she had. We were just starting to talk when Mother called.


"Jimmy, where are you?" She sounded a little scared. She always did now when I got out of sight, especially this time of day.

"In the driveway!" I yelled back.

"It's nearly dark. Time to come in."

After the usual aw-mom ritual, I got the usual five minute extension. It was part of our way of doing things. But she added, "Stay where I can see you. I don't want you getting out of pocket this near suppertime." Suppertime, of course, had nothing to do with what she meant. I moved around to the corner of the car and pretended to be playing with a three-wheeled toy truck while Molly and I talked. Then Mother called again, and I had to go in. Molly said, "Meet me in the playhouse tomorrow." Then she was gone.

The playhouse was originally a storage shed. My father, working



a short week like most of the people in town who were working at all, had scrounged materials and used his idle time to put in a floor of packing-case slats and pretty it up with paint remnants, and it now served both functions. I was supposed to garage my rolling stock there, and sometimes did. Mother could see it from the window over the kitchen sink, so no special permissions were required to be there.

The next day was a schoolday. I remember the sun was slanting low in the bone-dry sky when at last I was able to tiptoe into the shed, fearful that Molly would have grown tired of waiting and left. I glanced around at the clutter of the long-neglected space, then heard her voice from the darkest corner. Once I realized she was there, she suddenly became more visible.

For the first time since I decided to put the whole story down on paper, I find myself having trouble with the structure and sequence of my recall. Not that I doubt the essence of it despite what must be layer upon layer of confabulation and commentary in my own mind, but simply how one word led to another, and in a natural flow to the revelations and events that followed, is difficult to reconstruct. Certainly the dialogue is the product of my adult mind, but it *feels* right, and I think accurately represents the original transactions; in other places I have bridged the gaps of memory with my imagination simply to satisfy my own need for continuity, but again I think I have no more violated events in reality than any historian might in making a sensible narrative of deeds and happenings long past.


One thing that Molly said to me that evening was, "I need you to do some things I can't do."

"What kind of things?"

"Well, like pick things up. I can't pick things up now, since I'm dead."

My hair stands on end as I hear that now; I'm fairly sure those were her exact words. At the time, though, it seemed no more outrageous than if she'd said "since I had measles." She demonstrated by grasping a hoe handle standing in the corner; it went right through her fingers. It seems odd to me now that her hand, her whole body, felt solid to me, if cold, but to my child's mind then, it was simply one more element in a set of new realities perpetually unfolding. It must have reflected the powerful bond between us.

Molly's first assignment for me was to pick a jar of ground cherries. That was what we called them. I never tasted the true and edible ground cherry till I grew up and moved East; this was a collat-



eral relative, a prickly wild nightshade we were forbidden to touch. One bold and naughty boy we knew tasted one once. We expected him to die on the spot—in our childish mindset, not for simple biochemical reasons but for disobedience—but what he did instead was to get a grimace on his face and spit and spit. He said it was very bitter, and we took his word for it. None of us tattled on him.

Even for Molly's sake this was a hard task for me to swallow, involving as it did disobedience, danger, and possible punishment (or worse, a wordy lecture). I protested, but she promised that Mother wouldn't see me and the berries wouldn't harm me, and she promised true.

I was called in then, but the next afternoon right after school I found a dusty pint fruit jar and picked it full of the pale orange fruits. They grew every summer in the place where my mother every spring would plant a hopeful vegetable garden only to see it burnt out by late June, rootbound in the hard caliche soil and burnt brown by the merciless Texas sun. By this time of year the plants were dead, skeletal prickly stalks with their fruits, dried to crackly husks, still clinging to them.

Molly never appeared till nearly sunset, and even then in a shadowed place. As the sun slid downward, I pretended to play while I kept looking in the shed window, and when I saw her just visible in the dark corner, I went right in and sat on the floor by her. We had characteristically sat on the floor facing one another with our knees up and left ankles touching.


After a brief visit, she sent me to fill up the fruit jar at the faucet under the kitchen window and then, belatedly, break up the nightshade berries so they would soak in the water instead of floating. After I tucked the jar into a dark corner as instructed, she said, "Now we've got to talk."

She went on after a minute: "Teddy did it. He hurt me and killed me." I had always so assiduously avoided Teddy, we had so successfully kept the life we shared away from his sphere of influence, that she had to prompt me: "*Uncle Teddy.*"

"I'll tell on him, then they'll put him in jail."

Perhaps she smiled a sad smile and shook her head. One way or another, she showed me that the word of a barely school-age child, quoting a ghost, wasn't sufficient for conviction on a capital charge.

"If anybody else could just see me," she finished in a tearful voice. "I tried to tell Mama. Then I thought maybe I could scare Teddy and—Jimmy, we've got to stop him."



In spite of her limitations, I envied her her freedom and her knowledge. She told of following Teddy everywhere he went and catalogued his sins for me. The one that most shocked me was that he had stolen money from Nora's purse; I knew that stealing was a grave sin and, though it had only got to me by osmosis, that betrayal of family was wicked.

Having no conception of the enormity of what had actually happened to Molly and could happen to another, I only vaguely understood why the things that most concerned her were that he had done something real dirty with Joyce Ann's slightly retarded sister and that he had been following a little Mexican girl from East Ward School, halfway across town.

Her tearful urgency was so great, though, that I agreed immediately to carry out her plan. Even without tears I probably would have stood in front of the fearsome road grader for her.

Exactly how we did it I have not been able to recall. I do have a clear image of pouring the bitter amber infusion of nightshade berries into the bitter amber infusion of Teddy's stone crock of ripening home brew; how I got there without my mother or Mrs. Southworth intercepting me, I have no idea.

The Fort Nolan *Reporter* still keeps the big volumes of yellowed back issues, too fragile now for research, but they let me look at them under the supervision of a pretty, slightly acne'd high school girl getting ready to go to journalism school. When I found myself sinking too deep into nostalgia, I let her lead me to the more objective microfilm machine.

Newspapers in those days were more discreet, or perhaps I mean that they retained a sense of shame no longer found in journalism of whatever medium. The eight-year-old girl assaulted and strangled in South Ward was never named, though the whole town knew who it was, and the obituary in the next day's issue would have told the careful reader anyhow. The Theodore Tidwell, age twenty, of 913 Neff Street who died a few months later after drinking contaminated home brew—a not unheard-of event in those days—was not identified as related to the girl.

Nonetheless, there was enough meat in the sparse fare to trigger some recollections in me—less my own experiences than the tail-ends of adult conversations abruptly aborted or switched when my big ears walked into the room. Teddy had died in convulsions, “thrashing around like an animal”; disgraceful things were found



among his belongings; but even among themselves the grownups avoided specifics.

Primitive as forensic procedures must have been in the rural Southwest in those days, someone must have noticed that the home brew—and Teddy—were loaded with solanin, scopolamine, daturin, atropine, whatever other toxic alkaloids were in those bitter little fruits. Some cop must have thought of taking a closer look at the bachelor uncle when no hobo was unearthed. Maybe someone did see the whole picture, and let divine justice rest on its laurels. Molly had assured me I would never be suspected, and I wasn't. Nor have I ever, to this day, felt the slightest guilt.

By the rules of movies and novels, our last time together should have been bittersweet, but I don't think it was. I lacked the sense of tragedy, or at least of poignancy, I have developed since.

Molly came to me the night after all the excitement of Teddy's death. I was half asleep in the cosy cubicle that was my room. I felt her, cold as the grave, not so much slip into bed beside me as come into being there. We hugged, rather, wrapped ourselves in each other, and she started right in on what she had to say.

"We can't be together for a long time."

"How long?"

"A long, long time."

"How long is that?"

She hesitated. "Till you die, too."

"Maybe I could die now. I like you. I want to be with you."


I felt her fluffy hair brush my cheek as she shook her head. "Nnnh. You can't." By that she meant "may not" or "must not." "You have to live a long, long time."

"Then we'll be together?"

"Mm-hmm." I felt her hand move between us. "Cross my heart." She giggled a tiny giggle then, but I didn't realize why till years later when I heard the rest of the words to the litany.

We lay there embraced in the dark, Molly growing warmer all the while, till I fell asleep. When I woke she was gone, but I was at peace.

A few days after writing the above, I reread it, and it occurred to me for the first time that—excluding a few details—the whole story could be explained away on the basis of wish-fulfillment fantasy, normal childhood deficiencies in reality testing, that sort of thing. I



tried this thought on for size, wore it for a few days, and decided it didn't fit.

Then this morning. After first coffee, when it was good and daylight, I went to spread up my bed. When I picked up my pillow to fluff it, I noticed an indentation in the spare pillow beside it. I turned on the bedside lamp and saw, cupped in the pillow, a couple of fine brown strands, all Art Nouveau curves. The kind of strands that enough of would make a head of fluffy brown hair. Twice as long as my increasingly scarce straight grey ones. Certainly a living guest, after all these years without one, would have attracted my notice.

Yes, I am at peace.

FICTION

# Memory and Murder

## William Link

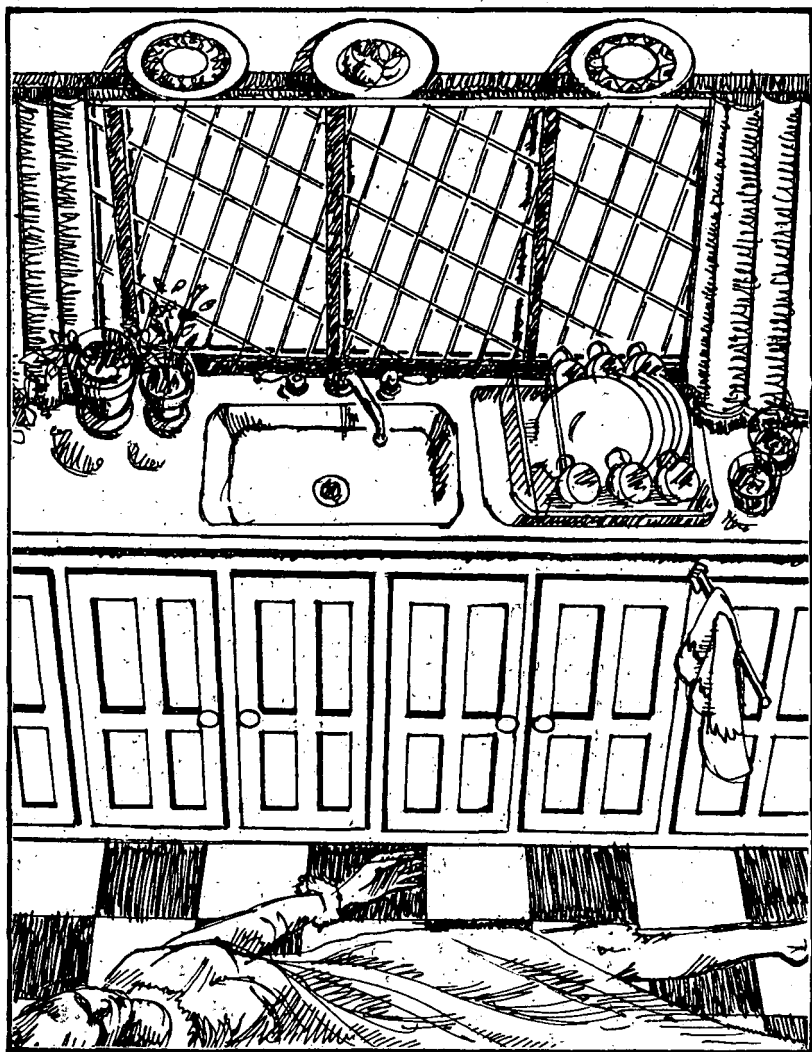


Illustration by Gary Hamilton

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/96

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

**L**ieutenant Meltzer particularly liked plush crime scenes; they were a welcome relief from bullet-riddled drug dealers in squalid alleys and corpses in rat-infected tenements. This one was a pleasure, like the mansions he enjoyed on the tube, Spanish haciendas in Beverly Hills with curving staircases and paintings in big gilt frames like the kind he saw at the Met.

Meltzer, a tall, rabbinical-looking young man, with a high forehead growing higher behind dark receding hair, watched the forensic team go about its regimented business. But mostly he checked out the real Persian rugs and fleshy Renoirs next to what resembled Franz Klines, bold impertinent brushstrokes like Chinese ideograms. The whole place with its antique furniture and pegged hardwood floors stank of money, but a sweet seductive smell it was.

His plainclothes sergeant, Ben Lincoln, an amiable African-American, came over and spoke in ultra-quiet tones as if he were in church. "The victim's in the kitchen, lieutenant. Come with me, I'll show you . . ."

He followed Lincoln through a dark maze of rooms, several looking down on the sunlight-spangled East River. The building was situated on East End Avenue near Gracie Mansion; a

thoroughfare of unostentatious wealth, doormen, poodles with their own trust funds.

A white female was slumped across the kitchen floor. She was somewhere in her sixties, gray hair, homely, wearing an expensive nightgown and robe. Even in death her face looked stricken, frightened, frozen now in a grimace. There were no visible wounds or outward indications of foul play.

"She was strangled," Lincoln volunteered.

"You don't have to whisper, sergeant."

Lincoln grinned. "Sorry. These kinda places intimidate me." He quickly knelt and pulled back the fur collar of the robe. There were faint bluish marks, discolorations at the neck. "Strangled. We're still waiting for the M.E."

Meltzer nodded, his eyes averted from the woman's face. She reminded him vaguely of his mother who was now in a rest home in New Brunswick. Mom's face wouldn't break mirrors, but it wouldn't be called photogenic either. His father, deceased, had been a vital, handsome man with an almost Mediterranean, olive-skinned cast. Meltzer looked like Mom.

"She live alone?" he asked Lincoln.

"No, no. Her old man's in the library. You want to see him now?"

Meltzer nodded. On the way out he noticed there was nothing on the kitchen counter but a bottle of Jack Daniel's and two cut-crystal liquor glasses filled with an amber fluid.

In the library, a big cosy room, its bookshelves choked with hundreds of bestsellers, their spines on fire from the reflected river light, Lincoln introduced Lorne Bacon. He made a gesture to shake Meltzer's hand, but the younger man avoided it.

"Sorry to intrude with all these people, Mr. Bacon, but . . ." Meltzer spread out his hands in an expressive, helpless gesture.

Mr. Bacon winced as if he had hit him. He was a fine-looking old man in his seventies with beautifully trimmed hair white as lime. He wore an old fashioned smoking jacket, its velvet lapels flecked with food stains, his benchmade shoes scuffed, lackluster.

"When was the last time you saw your wife, sir?" Meltzer asked gently.

Mr. Bacon blinked. "Don't remember exactly. Before I went to bed, I guess."

"And that would be last night. At what time approximately?"

"I don't recall. Midnight probably." He smiled blankly, inappropriately.

"Did she go to sleep with you?"

He shrugged.

"You don't remember?"

"No . . . I fell asleep, maybe by myself. Sometimes she stayed up late, watched television. Read." He gestured, smiling weakly, at the wall of books. "You can see. Those are all hers—I'm not much of a reader. Especially now. I mean, at my age."

Meltzer nodded sympathetically.

The old man began to ramble on about his wife's reading habits, murder mysteries, historical novels. Meltzer shot a covert glance at Lincoln, but the other man was watching a tug out on the river.

"What time did you get up this morning, sir?"

"My usual time, eight or so."

"And you looked around for your wife because she wasn't beside you in the bed?"

Another weak smile that seemed to strain at the tender muscles in his face. "It's not unusual—I mean my wife not being in bed with me when I wake. She gets up very early. Looks in at the housekeeper making breakfast."

"Where is the housekeeper, sir? I haven't noticed any servants around."

The old man thought about this. "No . . . no, the housekeeper is off Sundays and Mondays. Today is—"

"Monday, sir." Another quick

look at Lincoln, who returned this time a quizzical expression.

"So after you got up this morning," Meltzer gently led him, "you went looking for your wife?"

"Well, yes, after a bit. And . . . and . . ." His voice faltered as he obviously recalled finding what he had found in the kitchen. "I—I couldn't believe it. We've been married—" His eyes seemed to fold back in their sockets. "I guess . . . I guess . . ." Again the voice trailed off as he tried to track memories, to no avail.

Meltzer ignored his embarrassment. "I'm sure you'll remember it, sir. Now, did you hear anything last night? Maybe woke up in the middle of the night, heard voices, angry voices?"

"No." A weak smile again. The mouth was weak, even in repose. To Meltzer he seemed at times like a fumbling character actor on the tube or in the theater, unsure of his lines, congenitally insecure. "I'm a very deep sleeper, Mr.—what was your name again?"

"Meltzer, sir. Did your wife have any enemies?"

"Lord, no. Her sister hates—hated her, but she's long dead on Long Island." He looked down at his slender, graceful hands. "Can't think of anyone else."

"Could I look at your hands, sir?"

He looked up, genuinely startled. "My hands? What's wrong with my hands?"

"Nothing. It's just part of my job."

Mr. Bacon held them out, as if embarrassed by the pale liver spots on the backs.

Meltzer, trying not to alarm him, quickly turned them over, inspected the palms, and casually let them drop. "Thank you, sir. I'm sure we'll be talking again." He wanted to add that he was sensitive to the man's loss, but for some reason he held back.

In the hallway outside the library, Lincoln said, "I think this guy's senile."

"Maybe. But that's a nice ploy for an old man if he really killed her."

Lincoln checked his notebook. "No forcible entry. There've been several robberies in the building over the past three months. Maybe somebody got in here on a pretext after Bacon went to bed, and when the wife protested, well—"

"Why didn't he do her at the entrance? Why in the kitchen?" Then he remembered.

He ducked back into the library. Bacon was still sitting, almost dazed, feeling the lapel of his smoking jacket. Over his head hung an exquisite Boudin,

small, vivid, and Meltzer was momentarily glad that his wife had dragged him to that art appreciation course at Hunter.

"Mr. Bacon?"

"Hmmm?"

"Did you and your wife usually have a nightcap before you retired in the evening?"

"Yes." A nostalgic smile. "It was a ritual, Mr.—?"

"Meltzer. Bourbon, sir?"

"Yes. We both liked the taste. Only one."

"But last night—if you could remember. For some reason you never got your nightcap—"

The old man touched the side of his face where he was very badly shaved that morning. "I really don't remember, Mr.—?"

"Meltzer."

At the cop shop midafternoon, Meltzer got a call from Lincoln. "That information you wanted? His doctor's Kenneth Kramer, 715 West 82nd Street. I seriously think this old guy's elevator does not go to the penthouse."

"Maybe."

Looking at Dr. Kramer in his office was like looking into a blurred mirror for Meltzer: same long, intent face, lapdog features, one or two years older at best. "I'm sure you understand, lieutenant, that I cannot reveal to you my patient's medical history or records."

"I understand. I'm going to hy-

pothesize and scrutinize the topography of your face. And if I detect a landspill, I'll know I'm on the right track."

"I appreciate your humor, lieutenant, but if you're looking for seismic reactions, good luck. Go ahead."

"I think Lorne Bacon could be senile. But since I have a mom who's suffering from Alzheimer's, I'd say, after talking to him, studying him, he's got the same symptoms."

"Any 'landspills'?"

"Sizable. Now I just want you to speculate—could an Alzheimer's patient kill somebody and forget what he did?"

"Good question. I don't really know. I don't think any doctor could answer that. Maybe even, like a well person, he could remember what he did and be in denial. How's that?"

"Well, if he did do it, he's not even displaying any guilt."

Kramer smiled. "That's because he's not Jewish, lieutenant."

"What about his marriage—from what you saw of it?"

"Seemed fine. His wife, poor woman, was from an enormously wealthy family. Coal mines outside of Scranton."

"So she had all the money. What did Lorne do?"

"From what I know, sold insurance. He retired years ago. He's just a nice, probably not



too bright, comfortable old man who watched his rich wife clip coupons."

Meltzer went to the door. "Nice work if you can get it. You've been helpful—up to a point, doctor." He paused. "Do you think Bacon was capable of killing his wife?"

Kramer's answer was quick and flat: "No."

**T**he old man was taking a walk along the em-bankment behind the apartment building beside the river. It was early April, but the trees were still Giacometti-thin, bleak and twisted. A young, pretty Latino woman was following him like a guard-ian, probably the housekeeper. Meltzer caught up with them, showed the woman his I.D., Bacon walking ahead, as yet un-aware of his presence.

"You have to keep an eye on him?" he asked the woman.

"Yes. Doctor's orders."

Meltzer strode ahead, confronting the old man, who peered at him suspiciously as if he were an aggressive member of the homeless. There was no light of recognition in his eyes. "What—" he asked, alarmed.

"Lieutenant Meltzer, Mr. Bacon. We met yesterday morning, in your library."

The old man nodded, but Meltzer couldn't tell if he had

made the connection. He was wearing an expensive cashmere overcoat, a Stetson, muffler, all bundled up.

"I just wanted to report on the initial stages of our investigation. We found no fingerprints in the kitchen other than yours and your housekeeper's. And there were no signs of a forcible entry. Does anyone else have a key to your apartment?"

"No. No one." He was not the friendly old man Meltzer remembered from the apartment. Today he was edgy, almost hostile, annoyed that he had been accosted during his constitutional. "What does all this mean?" he asked. "Fingerprints and keys?"

"Inside job." Meltzer waited for his reaction; he had been deliberately provocative.

"Inside? You mean . . ."

Meltzer was silent, letting him draw his own conclusions. An icy blade of wind came off the river, scraping at the emaciated trees.

The old man's pale blue eyes grew dilated. "You don't mean you think—"

His hand, swaddled in a glove, slipped from his pocket and gripped Meltzer's forearm. Even through the leather the pressure was intense, the fingers like a steel armature digging into his flesh.

"I loved my wife, do you hear

me? She was a wonderful woman. You'd better get these cockeyed ideas out of your head and concentrate on finding the real person who did it."

Then the gloved hand went back into the sanctuary of the pocket, and the flushed face relaxed, the eyes growing smaller again, distant. Now he seemed almost embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

Meltzer didn't answer. His impulse was to rub the irritated portion of his arm, but he held back. He knew now that Dr. Kramer was wrong: there was no doubt in his mind that Lorne Bacon had the physical strength and the anger to strangle his wife.

**A**t the office there was a garbled message from his mother, that she had to see him. He fumed; the only time he had was to shoot over there tonight and by then she would have forgotten what she wanted to tell him. And that meant he would have to cancel a meeting with his daughter Sacha's teacher that evening. He was about to leave to follow up on another case when a call came in from Dr. Kramer.

"Anything new?" Kramer wanted to know.

"Only that we found out from another source that your patient has Alzheimer's," he lied.

"Yeah, well, I figured if you asked the housekeeper or one of his friends you'd find out eventually." There was a silence while he thought about something. "Now that you know, well . . . You should know that I would give him less than a year to survive. He's fast deteriorating. He might have to get a full-time nurse one of these days."

"So how's that affect the case?"

"Everything gets strained through your own personal prism, huh, Meltzer?"

"Just get on it. I'm a busy Jew."

"Suppose you could prove he did it? Would you go after a guy, tear him down, the newspapers, the media, if he only has a year to live?"

"You some kind of moralist, Kramer? You consult the Talmud before you cheat on your income tax? I don't make the rules here. I just gather the proof and present it to the D.A. He makes the decision whether we indict or throw in the towel."

"Uh-huh. Not your decision. That's what they call the Nuremberg defense."

Meltzer blew air through his nose. "You must be real fun on the high holidays. I'll bet at your seder you don't even edit the service; nobody eats till midnight."

Kramer laughed. "Keep me informed."

Meltzer's mother looked like a banshee, wild white hair, unkempt nails, no bra protecting her sagging breasts. She sat in the community room, other inmates watching the tube, playing canasta. Five minutes with her and his exasperation level was earth-shattering on the Richter scale.

"Sasha's your granddaughter, Mom. Can you get that straight?"

She ignored his reprimands, his annoyance. "And how is the little cutie? She graduates kindergarten this year?"

"She's preschool. But yeah, she's real smart. Takes after your side of the family."

"I never see you any more, sonny."

"Who are you looking at right now? I'm the mailman? Mom—I am buried under my caseload. And I just got a new one Monday, this old person like you, probably offed his wife and he can't even remember doing it."

This piece of news brought her up short. "Now, that's a new one," she admitted. "A man kills and forgets about it?"

"Yep. He's either mentally challenged or he's a coldblooded killer with a brand-new ploy."

She looked at him blankly. In an instant her fascination with the case had vanished. "You

want some coffee? We can get some before the cafeteria closes."

"Good idea. It'll keep me awake on the way back." But when he rose to follow her, he realized she suddenly hadn't a clue as to where they were going.

On the way from Jersey, half dozing on the train, he tried to analyze his frustration with his mother. She was less than a human being now, and it angered more than saddened him. He thanked his lucky stars again that he'd had the good sense to send her away to where they could look after her, even though it cost a fortune. If she had stayed home with them, it would have driven them all crazy. At times she was so forgetful, so perverse, he wanted . . . to kill her?

All at once Meltzer broke from his torpor. Wanted to kill her. Investigate that, Mr. Detective. Take that all apart like a broken Cuisinart. But if Bacon had killed his wife—he had killed a normal person. He was the one suffering from Alzheimer's. . . .

**E**arly the next morning he checked with the old man's housekeeper. She told him they always took their walk after lunch

at two o'clock. She would leave the key under the doormat.

Meltzer slipped into the apartment, and when he caught himself in the hall mirror, he had the look of a furtive catburglar.

Today the large apartment was dark, the sun playing hide-and-seek in an overcast sky. Only a few of the paintings glowed like a glitter of broken glass on the discreet walls. He smelled the faint, sweet odor of pipe tobacco—the old man must have smoked a pipe after lunch.

He went straight to the master bedroom, a big room frilly with flounces and a tasseled canopy over the bed. He saw the old man's carpet slippers on one side, so he figured his wife had slept on the other. He looked through the drawers of the night table on the woman's side: reading glasses, a little flashlight, trinkets, stubby pencils and ballpoints.

Next he went into the bathroom, turned on the fluorescent lights. It was fairly large and bright with an enclosed shower, the walls shining with aquamarine tiles. The mirrored medicine cabinet over the sink was filled mostly with women's jars, lotions, and assorted unguents as if the man existed in some other apartment. Right in front was a vial of sleeping pills. Meltzer squinted at the pharmacist's label, saw that a "Dr. Ken-

neth Kramer" had authorized the prescription for Barbara Bacon.

In the master bedroom he checked his watch (they wouldn't be back for another ten minutes) and called Kramer, spoke to him briefly. Then he managed to get Sergeant Lincoln at the cop shop.

"This is important," Meltzer said. "There were two glasses of bourbon on the kitchen counter that morning."

"Yeah. Right. We checked them for fingerprints."

"Mrs. Bacon's on both glasses?"

"You got it. And nobody else's. Why are you asking?"

Meltzer jerked around, tensing, hearing a door open somewhere in the depths of the apartment. "Hell, I think they came back early!"

"Who came back? Where are you?"

"I'll fill you in later. Listen—did the lab analyze the contents of the two glasses, the bourbon—"

"No. Why would they do that? She wasn't poisoned, she was strangled."

He heard the old man's voice calling out something to the housekeeper. "You're positive they didn't do an analysis?"

"Positive. You onto something?"

He was more glum than elated. "Yeah. Everything."

He found Lorne Bacon in the hallway, having hung up his coat and hat, looking somehow dislocated, confused. He regarded Meltzer as if he was merely a part of his general miasma.

"I had to do some looking around, Mr. Bacon," he said with authority. "Didn't want to bother you."

The old man was surprisingly congenial. "No bother. You want Mira to make you some coffee?"

"No, thanks. Would you mind coming with me into the library so we could have a little talk?"

"Of course not."

Meltzer closed the door after they had settled into the room. Bacon, distracted, fiddled around with his pipe, packing it with tobacco from a can. "Funny," he said to no one in particular, "I keep thinking I'll come into a room and find Barbara there, talking to a friend on the phone or buffing her nails."

"Why don't you sit down, Mr. Bacon."

"Why? That's usually what they say when they're going to hit you with some bad news." He chuckled. "That's what my stockbroker always says."

Meltzer weighed each word. "I think we've found the person who killed your wife."

Bacon stopped puffing the pipe, the match flame illuminat-

ing his surprised eyes as they darted up at the younger man. "You don't say. Who is it?"

"I'm sorry to say it's you, sir."

The old man finished lighting his pipe. Took a few exploratory puffs. His lined, placid face did not change expression. "And why do you say that, Mr.—?"

"Meltzer. I believe your act might be construed as self-defense."

"And why do you say that?"

"Your wife was hoarding sleeping pills—although apparently not for herself. Her physician says he prescribed them for her, but she said she needed them for you."

"I have never needed sleeping pills," he said firmly, almost as if it were a mark of distinction.

"I believe you. But I think you caught her putting the powder into your nightcap Sunday night and in a rage you took her life. Am I right?"

The old man didn't answer. He slowly leveraged himself up from his deep leather chair and went to the window. The river was a long gray island, unmoving.

"Maybe she was doing it out of sympathy," Meltzer added, his words a few pebbles dropping into the other man's pit of silence. "What used to be called mercy-killing. You would die painlessly in your sleep."

"No," Bacon said. "No, it was-

n't out of sympathy. She was just tired of being a nurse, a chauffeur, a maid, a lackey. She was a proud woman from a proud family." He turned around, still puffing the pipe, and Meltzer was glad his face was shadowed, the river light behind him. "She never loved me. She was ugly, I was handsome. She was rich, I hustled old friends from Harvard to buy insurance. Maybe she was always secretly ashamed of me, Mr. Meltzer. But then, with this illness, I became something she couldn't control. I was forgetful, angry, impossible. And when I became incontinent . . . when I even had to wear diapers to bed with her . . ."

"I understand," Meltzer said. He didn't really want to hear any more.

"I didn't want to do it. I loved her, she gave me a very comfortable life. But when I saw her dropping that drug into my drink . . ."

The two men sat there for a long time without speaking while the light darkened and the elevators creaked in the old

building with businessmen returning home to their loved ones.

Months later, Meltzer bumped into Dr. Kramer coming out of Sherry's wine store on Madison.

"He died last week," Kramer said. "I guess you saw the obit in the *Times*."

Meltzer nodded. "Nice write-up."

"Just an unsolved murder, huh? You never caught the guy who did it."

Meltzer shrugged. "You win some, you lose some."

"And those sleeping pills had no significance?"

Meltzer looked past him. "Not that we could determine."

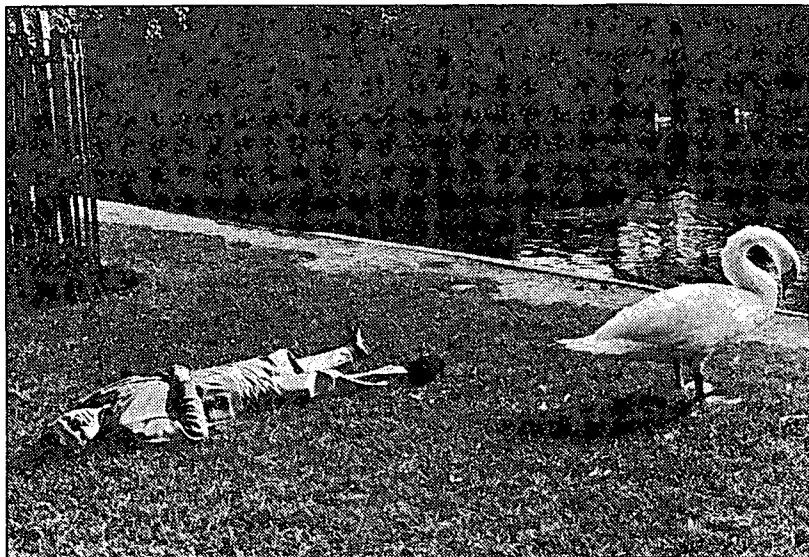
The two men shuffled on the street, reflecting on the broken bond between them. "Hey," Kramer said. "Why don't you come to my seder next week? Bring the family."

"Short service? Or the uncut version?"

Kramer grinned. "You know me: Every word."

"Pass," Meltzer said.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Magnum Photo, Inc. © 1995 Josef Koudelka*

A life swandered. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.



# Abou Roscoe Connor (May His Tribe Increase) Robert Loy



I want to tell you about how I accidentally became a kidnapper and a Republican, but first I have to tell you about a poem which is called "Abou Ben Adhem" by Mr. Leigh Hunt. (Well, I'm assuming he's a mister, but anybody who would spell Lee that way could be most nigh anything.) This poem, in case you ain't familiar with it, is about a guy named Ben Adhem—and he's just a guy, nothing special about him, kind of like me and probably like you even if you don't admit it—who wakes up one night and there's a great big old angel in his bedroom. This kinda terrifies Ben Adhem, as you can probably imagine if you put yourself in his position, especially since the angel is writing down names in this glowing book.

So Ben Adhem says to the angel, "Whatcha doin'?" and the angel says, "I am writing down the names of people that love my boss, who is God."

So Ben Adhem says, "Well, is my name on there?" and the angel runs his finger down the list, shakes his head, and says, "Nope. Sorry."

Now instead of saying, like you or me might say, "Well then, get your angel ass the hell out of my bedroom," old Ben Adhem says, "At least make a little note on there saying that even if I don't particularly love God over-

much, I do loves my fellow man."

It was probably just a last shot at saving his ass, but it worked, cuz the next night the big old angel is back with still another book. This one is the names of folks that God loves. And what do you know, Ben Adhem's name is on the top of the list, and not just because it was probably alphabetical.

The reason this poem has stuck with me, out of the probably dozens I have read in my lifetime, is because I understand it—except for what "Abou" means—and also because I can relate to it. I feel sorta like old Ben Adhem myself.

Not that I'm real crazy about my fellow man. Most of the fellow mans I know are fairly worthless bastards who I would just as soon be a hermit as have anything to do with. But what I mean is, like old Ben Adhem, I only got one saving grace. If it hadda been me, I would tell that angel, "Well, okay, I'm not a real religious man, but write down that I do love with all my heart my Maria, and I always have tried to be a good husband for her and give her anything she wanted. If that ain't enough to get me into heaven, then I reckon I ain't gonna get to go."

And it is true. I do love my Maria. There is nothing I would not do for her. Already I have

stopped lying, even though I was uncommonly good at it, and it was only a little easier than stopping breathing for me—stopped smoking, too, which weren't exactly no picnic neither.

I try to give my Maria anything and everything she wants. For an example, she loves shoes, and she has more shoes in her closet right at this minute than I have owned altogether in my whole life even counting bowling shoes and tuxedo shoes which I only rented.

I am happy to buy them for her because to make my Maria happy is what makes me happy. Roscoe Connor is a simple man, and I don't really care about shoes or anything else that they advertise on the home shopping network, which is probably my Maria's most favorite television program. On Friday nights I do like to drink some Miller's High Life beers, but if my Maria wants, say, a new pair of mules (by which I mean the kind you wear on your feet, not the beasts of burden, though if that was what she wanted I'd be heading on down to the donkey store) that week, I will get mules and then drink Olympia or some other beer that is not as expensive as Miller's High Life. Sometimes if the shoes are real expensive I will be drinking water on Friday night and this is okay, because

like I said I love my Maria and whatever she wants I will move hell and high water to get for her.

Then my Maria decided she wanted to have a baby, she has to have a baby, a puppy or a kitten won't do. I don't know where she got this idea or where she thinks we will get the money to take care of a baby on account of all our money goes into the landlord's and the electric company's pockets or onto my Maria's feet.

But she wants a baby, and I try as hard as I humanly can to give her a baby. We try for about a year and nothing is happening, so we go to the doctor, and the doctor says because of a blockage in my ducts I have a low sperm count, only about two million, which it seems like ought to be enough to get the job done but it ain't. My own personal feeling is that two million is not a low sperm count and maybe the sperms are just lazy or allergic to eggs or something, but I am not the expert, the doctor is, and he gives us a bunch of charts and calendars with dates circled as to when we're supposed to try to make a baby and when we're not.

I will tell you right now that there is nothing like charts and calendars to take all the romance out of baby making. Nights when I was feeling ro-

mantic my Maria would look at the calendar and say, "No, we can't tonight. Save those sperms for Sunday cuz I will be ovulating then." And then Sunday we would do nothing all day and night but try to make a baby, breaking only for lunch which was oysters and asparagus, neither of which are my favorite foods. And then on Monday I would have to drag my ass to work, a shadow of my former fairly robust self.

Unfortunately, this does not work either. And the doctor says my sperm ducts must be in even worser shape than he thought and he will have to operate. This operation, which as he explains it only involves hooking a couple of tubes together, costs four thousand five hundred dollars and some change, and I just about hit the ceiling. I thought it was fairly outrageous when the cable company charged me thirty-five dollars to disconnect Home Box Office, which my Maria thought she wanted but turned out to prefer the Home Shopping Show, and they didn't even have to leave their office to do it. Four thousand five hundred dollars and some change to hook up a couple of tubes! Granted, these tubes are inside me, which makes it a little more complicated, not to mention painful for me, but still—four

thousand five hundred dollars and some change!

But my Maria wants a baby, and this puts me between a hard place and the deep blue sea on account of I don't have four thousand five hundred dollars, and by the time I save it, even if I never drink nothing but Olympia and my Maria goes barefoot, which she won't do, we will be in our seventies and my sperms count will be so low there probably won't be anything flowing in the old ducts at all by then and we would be too old to chase after a young 'un even if there were.

I explain how things are to Maria, and she nods her head and says she loves me anyway. I ask if she wants to go shoe shopping, and she just shakes her head no. I offer to take her to the Genuine Gypsy Circus which is in town, on account of I know my Maria loves clowns and tigers, but she says, "No, that's all right, Roscoe."

It ain't all right, though, cuz sometimes in the night I will wake up and hear my Maria crying very softly because she doesn't want me to hear, and I know she is crying for a baby.

This breaks my heart much worse than I can say. And I swear to God that I will find a way to get that money somehow even though I have promised my Maria that I will not do any-

thing illegal or dishonest and, needless to say, this severely limits my options.

I haven't given completely up on the old fashioned way of making babies. I faithfully do the exercises the doctor told me about that are supposed to increase your sperm count, but since these exercises consist mostly of clenching and unclenching your butt muscles, I have not a whole lot of faith in their being any kind of miracle cure. I am also skipping lunch and putting that money in the bank for the duct operation. But since I always eat lunch at Taco Bell, where I have a bean burrito and ice water, I am only saving about fifty-nine cents a day, and you do not have to be a Einstein to see it's going to take forever at least to save four thousand five hundred dollars and some change at this pitiful rate.

Then one day I come home from work same as usual and am jogging up the stairs cuz the elevator is still broken same as usual. And I don't know if it's cuz I was fretting over my Maria and how the one thing she wants "most in the whole wide world" may be beyond my capability to give her or because there is not enough oxygen in the stairwell for a cockroach to keep the blood pumping to his brain so he can remember what

floor he lives on much less a human such as myself, but I get off on the wrong floor.

I realize my mistake almost right away, as this floor's hallway is almost completely covered with a mossy grayish-green carpet and the carpet on our floor has been missing ever since they tried to clean it and it fell to pieces and clogged up the steam machine, so I turn to clomp up another flight of stairs when of a sudden I hear somebody crying. A baby somebody.

I stop and listen. Something or somebody must have deeply offended this child cuz he is screaming like a banshee, which I'm not sure what it is exactly, but I don't care how good they are at screaming, which judging from what I have heard about them is all they do, they couldn't be any better or louder at it than this baby I am hearing.

A door is partway open halfway down the hall, and I walk down to it and knock on it, which nobody answers because as it turns out nobody is home except the baby and he is too little to answer the door.

"Hello! Anybody home?" I says as I walks in cuz I don't want anybody to think I'm a burglar. All the lights and the television are on, and the furniture here is so nice I wonder what it's doing in this build-

ing—heck, this neighborhood for that matter. But I don't wonder for long because right in the middle of the room, a little guy in a Winnie-the-Pooh jumpsuit is giving me the serious once-over.

In his hand he holds a yellow and blue toy truck covered with saliva and drool and God knows what else. I have evidently not made a good first impression cuz he rares back and pitches this truck right at me. If the kid was aiming for my forehead right above my left eye, then he has damn good aim cuz this is exactly where he hits me. The truck feels to my skull like it's made of some harder-than-usual steel or something, not at all the soft cottony things you'd think a baby would have amongst the ammunition in his playpen.

I am dazed for a minute or two, and I walk around rubbing my forehead and cursing, for all the good it does me, but I don't get mad cuz I can see the little guy meant it all in fun. He gives me a big ol' gap-toothed grin, laughs, and says, "Da!"

"What are you doing here all by yourself, child?" I ask him. "Where is your mama?"

He doesn't answer me, of course, not in any way you might call coherent. I ain't any good at guessing people's ages, which is why I don't work at the Genuine Gypsy Circus even

though they probably pay better than the job I got now, but I reckon this guy to be about ten or eleven months old. He holds up his arms like he wants me to pick him up, but he's kind of wobbly on his pins and he falls on his bottom. He's not at all discouraged, though, just struggles back up, holds out arms to me, and calls me "Da!" again.

So I pick him up, and it wasn't until I was holding him and he was trying to gouge my mustache and top lip off that I realize I now have in my arms the one thing my Maria wants more than anything else in the world. And he doesn't appear to have a family or even any friends, least not any worth a stink, else why would they leave him all alone like this? I know if I think about this too long I won't do it, so I grab a blanket and a bottle and me and my new friend scoot out the window and up the fire escape to home.

"Oh my stars and garters, Roscoe! A baby boy!" Maria gently grabs the baby out of my arms and I back away, ready to call 911 for an ambulance, but the little guy displays none of his violent tendencies toward my Maria possibly because I did not bring that eighteen-wheeled missile up with us.

"He's beautiful, Roscoe. Where did you get him?"

"Maria, I promised I would never again lie to you, so I'm telling you honestly and truthfully that I would rather not answer that question."

But my Maria doesn't hear me anyway. She is walking around the room talking to the baby, saying things like, "Ooh, you're such a cute wittle hookey-wookey. Yes, oo are! Yes, oo are!" over and over. Now it's true my Maria did not go to no Ivory League school or nothing, but she usually expresses herself better than that and I am a little embarrassed for her. But the guy in the Winnie-the-Pooh suit thinks she's the funniest thing he ever saw. Every time she calls him a hookey-wookey, he just cracks up laughing all over the place.

That first night my conscience was quiet and I'm not worried about nothing. What I figure is that one night of changing diapers and getting up in the middle of the night to feed a baby and my Maria will be begging me to take that baby back and exchange it for a pair of pumps. I can have that baby back before his worthless neglectful parents even know he is gone.

The next day neither me nor my Maria has any idea what a sizable pile of mess we have stepped into. My ignorance is due to the fact that I have now

gotten into the habit of not buying the newspaper any more so I can get thirty-five cents a day closer to my sperms duct operation, and Maria because she only watches the Home Shopping Network and they do not stop the selling for news no matter how major. World War Three could break out with O. J. Simpson and Lisa Marie Presley-Jackson leading the charge and the Home Shopping Network will still be hawking woks and cubic zirconias.

When I got home from work that first day, my Maria says to me, "Good, Roscoe, I'm glad you're home. I need you to go back out and buy baby foods and diapers."

My Maria has not said one more word about where did this baby come from, and I am beginning to think maybe she has forgotten we did not get it through the normal channels, so to speak, but I haven't forgotten. I think it will be a bad idea for me to go to the store and load down my buggy with baby foods and diapers when every single body in the whole neighborhood knows I have only a few million sperms and no babies thanks to my Maria's habit of gossip.

So what I do is I put on a Seattle Mariners baseball cap, sunglasses, and a scarf as a



kind of disguise before I go out on this baby foods buying binge.

Less than one hour later I am putting these same clothing articles back on again and going back out for more supplies, on account of it turns out I have bought the wrong kind of baby foods. The newest member of my family likes Gerber's apricots and nothing but Gerber's apricots. He is very emphatic and uncompromising on this point.

The change that has come over my Maria is nothing less than amazing. Although it never actually happened before, I am fairly certain that if I invited a friend up to the apartment and said friend silently had his heart set on Gerber's apricots and proceeded to fling every other food we serve him all over the walls and the ceiling and in my Maria's new hairdo she would be quite irate, and rightfully so in my book.

But when this baby hurls food, my Maria just smiles like it ain't nothing more than a charming idiosyncrasy, and she wipes the goop out of her hair and calls the baby a "wittle snuggly buggy" and other poetic but meaningless names like that.

So like I said I don my disguise and go back out to the store to get Gerber's apricots for Little Cesar. I have taken to calling the kid Little Cesar on

account of he has curly hair and a big grin usually with Gerber's apricots or something equally disgusting smeared all around his lips so he looks like Cesar Romero as the Joker in the old Batman television program, only Cesar Romero's hair was green and the only thing green about this kid is in his diapers, which I do not want to talk or even think about.

I gotta say one thing for Little Cesar. He is pretty good about sleeping at night, unlike many other bambini I have heard horror stories about. Perhaps it is because he is worn out from playing peek-a-boo and other games all day with my Maria and rocking and singing with her, and of course he's probably tired from flinging oatmeal and applesauce and other baby foods he don't care for at the walls where I don't think it's going to come off without dynamite and I can kiss my security deposit goodbye.

He wakes up one time during the night, and he doesn't even get to start hollering good before my Maria is up and waiting on him hands and feet. All he wants is a bottle, but she gives him a fresh diaper and a couple of verses of "Old McDonald's Farm" and a cheek pinch and calls him her "funny bunnsy-wunnsy" for good measure.

I have never in all our years.

seen my Maria so happy, which means I have never been so happy my own self, cuz making my Maria happy is what makes me happy, and I gotta admit despite a few lapses in what I consider to be good manners I am grown right fond of Little Cesar, too. To tell you the truth, I also am starting to forget that we did not get Little Cesar through the normal channels.

Until the next morning, that is, when I, assuming that I don't have to scrimp for that sperms duct operation any more, buy the daily newspaper, and not only do I get forcefully reminded that Little Cesar is not ours, but I learn something new, too—I learn I am up the creek without a paddle or even a boat.

The front page story is all about Edward Huffensnipe's baby boy being kidnapped. *Senator Edward Huffensnipe*. Senator Edward "Let's-get-criminals-off-the-cushy-comfortable-streets-and-into-hot-sweaty-prisons-no-more-mollycoddling-one-strike-and-you're-out" Huffensnipe.

Of a sudden I am not quite so happy any more. All of the unwanted, neglected babies in the world, whose absence their no-good parents probably would not even notice, and I have to snatch a get-tough-on-crime Republican senator's offspring.

My heart is jumping around at the back of my throat like to

strangle me, and I am wondering if I have enough money left over from buying baby foods for a one-way bus ticket to Brazil. But then I think no, calm down, Roscoe, there must be some mistake. There is no way Senator Huffensnipe lives in my neighborhood, he doesn't even come through when he's campaigning for his reelection even though he could probably buy votes cheap on account of the fact that most of my neighbors are not as scrupulously honest as myself.

Couldn't be his baby, I tell myself. No way.

But there's a picture of the "victim" on page 7A, and it's Little Cesar all right, looking extremely ungrunted like somebody has just informed him that peek-a-boo has been outlawed and the cupboard is bare of Gerber's apricots. The article says the baby had been left with a sitter, the daughter of one of Senator Huffensnipe's campaign supervisors. She says she left the baby for two seconds to go down the hall and buy a Diet 7UP, and when she came back, the baby was gone.

Now on top of everything else I am feeling very sorry for that poor girl. Losing the child you're in charge of is even worse than raiding the refrigerator or making long distance telephone calls to your boyfriend. It can

pretty much ruin your babysitting career.

All day at work I'm banging my head and cutting my hands so much it's a wonder I'm not dead of a double concussion and loss of blood, on account of my mind is not on what I'm doing. My mind is mulling over the only two options I have under the circumstances I find myself in. And both of them are equally unappealing.

The way I saw it, I could either pack up Little Cesar and my Maria and whatever else would fit in my old Datsun, which ain't much, and go on the lam, thereby making a posthumous prophet out of my dear departed mother, who always said the police would be after my worthless hide one day, or I could break my Maria's heart to an extent that no amount of mules or flats would ever be able to repair, take Little Cesar away from her and somehow sneak him over the moat and up the drawbridge into his daddy's castle.

That night after I dragged my bruised and battered body and my worried mind home, I sounded my Maria out on this second option.

"Maria, honey," I says to her, having to just about shout to be heard over her and Little Cesar's game of bathtub peek-a-boo, which you might think is

not much of a game, lacking in any kind of deep strategy as it does, but Little Cesar never even gets tired of it. "What if Little Cesar couldn't live with us any more for some reason? That would be all right, wouldn't it?"

"What are you talking about, Roscoe? You mean when he grows up and goes away to college?"

Ai-yi-yi! This I have not even thought about. How am I going to afford to send the boy to college when I cannot even afford to drink Miller's High Life on a regular basis?

"College is a long time away, isn't it, snookey-woogums?" Maria said, mostly to me, but the "snookey-woogums" part was for Little Cesar. "We don't have to worry about that yet."

We might not have to worry about paying the rent much longer either, since the state will probably be springing for our room and board for the next ten or twenty years, I think, but I don't say anything to my Maria. How can I? She has wanted a baby so bad, and she is so happy since she has this one.

I turn on the television news while my Maria and Little Cesar have a race to see if she can read him out loud a Dr. Seuss book before he rips out all the pages and consumes them with great gusto and relish like they was Gerber's apricots.

The news is full of stories about Senator Huffensnipe and Little Cesar and Mrs. Huffensnipe, who unlike her husband seems like a very nice lady. She is crying and the camera zooms in for a closeup of one wet tear rolling off her nose.

Now I really feel terrible. I never should have taken Little Cesar. I should have left him right there in that playpen and gone on home and kept doing my butt-clenching exercises.

The news lady says no ransom demands have been made yet, the police are stymied though they think it is probably the work of terrorists, probably Democrats, and the FBI has been brought into the case. I am so nervous and confused I wish I had never stopped smoking cigarettes. If it was just the local doughnut-dunkers, we might get away with it, but I hear some of those FBI boys are pretty sharp, and I figure sooner or later it is going to dawn on them that, duh, maybe we should check out the apartment directly above where this felony took place.

She also says there is a five thousand dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators, and it crosses my mind to wonder if five thousand dollars would be enough to pay my bail if I turn myself in and throw

myself at the mercy of Senator Huffensnipe, of which there doesn't appear to be much.

So many thoughts are zooming through my mind. My Maria, after putting Little Cesar to bed, is so giddy and happy she wants to fool around without even checking her ovulation calendar, and I turn her down, the first time that has ever happened, I am so nervous.

The next day at work everyone is talking about the kidnapping and about the five thousand dollar reward. Everybody agrees that if they knew who did it they would turn them in in a New York minute, even if it was their own grandmother napping the kid they would do this, reaffirming my already fairly low opinion of my fellow mans.

I am trying to solve this problem the way I heard some guy on TV said to do it, by weighing the pros and cons. On one end of the scale is my Maria's happiness, which is so hefty it will take one heck of a thing to outweigh it. On the other end I throw in the morality of the thing, I throw in that poor unemployed babysitter and Mrs. Huffensnipe crying for her baby, and still my Maria's side is heavier. I add in a long prison sentence, and I add in them taking Little Cesar away when

they catch us anyway. And I know what I have to do.

I listen to the radio all day with one ear while they talk about that five thousand dollar reward. Now they say they'll pay five thousand dollars for the safe return of the baby. This, of course, is what I've decided I have to do, but I can't do it yet. I'm waiting for them to add three little words onto the end of that message.

They don't do it either that day or the next, but Saturday night on my way home from the grocery store with forty jars of Gerber's apricots, I hear those three words I have been waiting for. A five thousand dollar reward for the return of the baby. No questions asked.

Those were the three words I was waiting for. Now I know I have to do the hardest thing I have ever done in my life, but do it I must. I promised my Maria I would always tell her the truth, so as much as I wanted to, and you can believe I wanted to bad, I couldn't lie or even beat around the bush about this.

"Maria," I says to her, "I know you love Little Cesar, and to tell you the truth I kinda like having the old apricot-eater around the place, too. But he's Senator Huffensnipe's kid, and we got to give him back."

"Roscoe, no, you can't," she says, and starts to cry. This im-

mediately gets the attention of Little Cesar, who had been very involved in trying to stick an orange Crayola crayon into his ear. He climbs into my Maria's lap and starts squalling, too. I know how they feel. I feel a little like bawling myself. I am an easy-going guy, but there is one thing I hate, and that is to see my Maria cry. If somebody was to say to me, "Roscoe, you have a choice, you can either make your Maria cry or you can go ride the subway late at night, drunk, in your underwear, with hundred dollar bills in both hands," I would be stripping down and filling my hands with Franklins.

Of course, in this situation I don't have that option.

"Honey, we have to. His mama and his daddy are very worried about him."

Maria hugs Little Cesar and says, "I'll call them, and I'll tell them don't worry. Little Cesar is having good care taken of him, and I will love him and protect him forever. And I will do it, too, Roscoe. Ain't I been taking good care of him?"

Another couple of tears come trickling out of her eyes, and just like they had rehearsed it or something Little Cesar turns and gives me a big wet raspberry. My decision is obviously a very unpopular one. Even I hate it.

I try everything I can think of,

but my Maria will not be placated, which means calmed down, you can look it up if you don't believe me. All I really want to do is go over to the sofa, make that hug into a three-way deal, kiss my Maria's eyes and cheeks till all the tears are gone like I used to when she was upset about things that used to seem important like shoes and where we would go when we went out to dinner. I wanted to say, "Okay, we'll keep Little Cesar and live happily ever after just like them families in the storybooks."

But I couldn't. And Maria was not making it any easier for me. If she had gotten mad and started hollering or even throwing stuff at me like flowerpots and dishes the way she used to do back in the bad old days when she caught me in a lie, it would have been better, cuz then I could have got mad back, and grabbed Little Cesar and stomped out. But what we were discussing now was way too important to get mad about.

"We have to, baby. It's the right thing to do."

"Yeah, well, if it's the right thing to do how come it feels so wrong?"

I couldn't answer that question, and I couldn't stand the awful way she was looking at me any more. But I couldn't back down either. I bent down

and started gathering up Little Cesar's stuff.

My nerves was pretty well frazzled by the time I got downtown to the senator's office, on account of the fact that Little Cesar had been hollering and calling me all kinds of horrible names in baby language the whole ride over, plus the fact I wasn't at all sure that I would have a home when I got back home, if you know what I mean. So I was in no mood for monkey business, just let me drop off the kid and head back home while my clothes are still in the closet and not out on the sidewalk. I did butt-clenching exercises all the way and I planned to do them on the way back also. My Maria was right. She had taken very good care of Little Cesar, and she would make a great mother if my sperms could ever get their act together and if she would ever let me anywhere near her again.

I gotta give Senator Huffle-snipe credit for one thing. He was as good as his word, even if his word was sneaky and misleading. He said "no questions asked," and when me and Little Cesar marched into his office, about the only thing he didn't do to me was pose any queries, not even a "How do you do?"

What this wolf in snake's clothing did was jump up from

behind his desk and say, "You must be crazy busting in here like—" Then he grabbed Little Cesar rudely out of my arms and told these two goons standing by the door to grab me, which they not only happily did but also threw me face-first down into a chair and slapped some plastic handcuffs on me.

Then he pressed a buzzer on his desk and told somebody, "Call the cops. We caught the kidnapper."

Like I said, a man of his word, no questions were asked. But I still felt like I had been misled. That's what I get, I guess, for not reading between the lines.

Little Cesar was screaming, and I might have been tempted to do a little hollering myself but my face was too deeply embedded in the seat of that chair to do anything much more than breathe, thanks to the fat goon with the mustache who was taking no chances on me even though I was handcuffed, so he was sitting on me, too.

I was really wishing I had just stayed home, if you want to know the truth. Damn morality and doing the right thing, this is where it always seems to get me.

I sure as hell don't want to go to prison, though. I had to get home to my Maria. I had to figure out how to make a baby with a task force of only a couple of

million sperms. I had lots more important stuff to do than sit here while a fat man with poor personal hygiene ground my face into the furniture and a Republican who hated my guts sent my ass to prison.

"Well—" I squiggled out from under the fat goon, and before the other goon could grab me and heap more indignities upon my person, I said: "This is a heck of a nice way to treat the man who rescued your baby."

"Rescued?" If Senator Huffensnipe ever sneered in his campaign posters or commercials like he was sneering at me now, everybody in the world would be a Democrat or a Libertarian or a Methodist or something. "What are you talking about, punk?"

I'm not crazy about people calling me "punk," but I let it slide. I knew I didn't have much time before the cops got there and flew me off to Devil's Island. I didn't know what I was going to say to this guy. I just hoped my lying skills hadn't completely atrophied to nothing, cuz there was no way I was going to tell him the truth. I'd sit there like a dummy for days before I'd do that.

"That's right, rescued," I said. "I singlehandedly tracked down the kidnappers and got your baby back for you, and what do you do to thank a concerned citizen working hard to wipe out crime?"



Bind my hands and let your go-  
rilla use me for a La-Z-Boy. I've  
got half a mind to sue you."

I sounded a whole heck of a lot  
more confident than I felt, espe-  
cially since the fat goon, who  
had fallen hard to the floor  
when I squirmed out from under  
him, had finally managed to get  
his girth up off the floor, and he  
grabbed me by my tied-behind-  
my-back arms and pulled me  
across the room a good ways. I  
thought for a minute he was go-  
ing to defenestrate me, which  
means to throw my ass out the  
window, you can look it up if you  
don't believe me, but Senator  
Huffensnipe raised his hand as  
though to say, hold on just a  
minute, you can defenestrate  
him later. First let me verbally  
torture him and tear apart this  
big lie he's fixing to tell.

"All right, pal, let me . . . let  
me . . ." Let me breathe is what  
I think he was trying to say on  
account of Little Cesar was  
pulling on the skinny end of  
Senator Huffensnipe's necktie,  
doing his best to strangle dear  
old dad, a brave and noble act  
for which I made up my mind  
then and there if I somehow get  
out of this jam in my jeans and  
not prison pinstripes I will buy  
him all the Gerber's apricots  
and Dr. Seuss books he can eat.  
"Let me ask you one question.  
How were you able to track  
down the kidnappers when the

police and the FBI couldn't do  
it?"

There was, of course, nothing  
I would like better than to tell  
him how I did that, especially  
as how I could see I was making  
at least a little bit of headway  
with him, graduating as I had  
from "punk" to "pal," but noth-  
ing was coming to mind.

"Well, taking nothing away  
from the pros who no doubt do  
good work and probably deserve  
a hefty raise, it seemed to me  
that they were going about this  
the wrong way," I said, stalling  
for time and praying, really  
praying hard, albeit silently, for  
one good, crisp, fresh, believable  
whopper of a lie.

And then of a sudden I got it.  
It was a big one and a bad one  
cuz I'd not only be lying myself  
out of something, I'd be lying on  
somebody else.

When I'd promised my Maria  
I would never lie again, I had  
left myself one safety valve. I  
figured that just once if I really  
needed it, I could tell a lie and it  
wouldn't count if I crossed my  
fingers like we used to do when  
I was in school. To be fair,  
though, I made the rule that  
this was only a one-time deal.  
Fortunately I had never needed  
it before. I say fortunately be-  
cause God knows I needed it  
now, I guess that's why He sent  
it to me.

I crossed 'em now and said,

"It occurred to me that the gypsies down at that Genuine Circus might have taken the baby, I mean not to be racist or nothing, but you know that gypsies have notoriously lax morals about taking what don't belong to them. I went down there and sure enough there he was."

Little Cesar was doing his best to back me up, crying and throwing up on dear old dad and straining to get away and come to me, but Senator Huffensnipe was still doubtful.

Very doubtful.

"There's just one problem. That circus left town two days ago. Not only that, but Genuine Gypsy is just a name, an advertising gimmick. I seriously doubt there were any actual—"

"Oh nō, them gypsies was genuine, all right, rings in their noses, scarves on their heads, other people's jewelry in their pockets. And it's true they had already folded up their tents by the time I figured out what had happened." I was on a roll now. Thank heavens I had not lost my knack. "So I ran down their wagons out of town, told them I was a doctor and said that was one very sick little white baby they had on their hands. When I explained to them that the disease was very contagious and fatal to gypsies, they were only too happy to hand him over to me. I know I probably should have

told the police instead of going off on my own like that, but there wasn't much time, and I had no evidence, only a hunch."

Nobody said nothing for a few minutes, except Little Cesar who was babbling on excitedly about something, but whether he was cheering me on or pointing out the big holes in my story I couldn't tell. Senator Huffensnipe was turning all this over in his mind. Not that I thought there was much chance he was going to invite me, but I decided I'd better not play poker with this guy, I couldn't tell nothing at all about which way he was leaning.

Finally he turned his hard blue eyes on me and said, "You're quite a liar, aren't you?"

Great, he saw through it. Well, I'll get free medical care in prison, maybe I can get that sperm ducts operation, and me and my Maria can make a baby when I get out if I'm not way too old or a hardened career criminal.

"If you hadn't thought up such a whopper, those gypsies would have probably had Edward Junior halfway to Transylvania by now." He motioned at the fat goon, who didn't look any too happy about it but cut me out of the handcuffs nevertheless.

"Go tell Beebee out front to cancel that call to the cops. Tell her everything's under control," he said to the other goon. And

then to me, he said, "No hard feelings about the little misunderstanding, I hope. I mean, with the stress and everything I've been under lately, I'm sure you can forgive my hastiness, Mr.—, I'm sorry, what was your name?"

"Connor," I says, and shakes his hand which is soft and squishy like every politician's I've ever felt. "And there ain't no hard feelings as long as you spell it right on my reward check."

That was one thing I remembered from my days as a less scrupulous person, if you're gonna lie, lie big, and be audacious and arrogant about it. Lie little or lie meek and you're just begging to get caught.

"Of course, of course," he said, and gave me a hearty we're-buddies-now-so-don't-sue-me kind of laugh. "It's the least I can do for such a brave and conscientious constituent, who I am sure must be a Republican."

I had exhausted my supply of legal lies so when I in the excitement of the moment told him I

was indeed a Republican, I made a note to myself that I was going to have to put my disguise back on and go pull that GOP lever in the next election, hoping the whole time that my ancestors didn't come out of their graves after me for it.

To make a long story short, I got a few more pats on the back from Senator Huffensnipe, a couple more dirty looks from the goons, and a big wet sloppy kiss from Little Cesar. I also got my check, which I took straight to the bank and cashed before Senator Huffensnipe could change his mind. I knew just what I was going to do with it, too. Pick up my Maria, head over to the hospital, and get all my ducts in a row, so to speak, and when the operation was over, ask the nurse to bring up to my recovery room a six-pack of Miller's High Life. Maybe even a twelve-pack. I feel like after what I've been through I deserve the champagne of bottled beers.

And that's the truth.

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the May issue.*

The West was getting wilder every week. Something had to be done. All three men arrived as planned at the Silver Spur saloon.

The governor of Colorado spoke first. "I, fer one, am plumb exasperated with all these outlaws headin' west."

"Me too," agreed the governor of Kansas, pushing his ten-gallon Stetson back and wiping his forehead. "We gotta act to pertect the settlers. All this crime is givin' my state a bad name."

"I got a suggestion," declared the governor of Nebraska. "Much as I don't like 'em in general, I think the time has come to call in some bounty hunters—honest ones if there is such a breed."

"Yeah, we gotta do *somethin'* drastic," said the Colorado governor. "But so they don't all flock to the same state, we oughtta agree on the same reward for each kind of criminal—one amount fer hoss thieves, another fer cattle rustlers, one fer armed robbers, one fer claim jumpers (we had a lotta them lately), and finally, one fer card cheaters." He nodded significantly toward the corner table, where a professional cardsharp was riffing through a deck.

After some discussion the three governors had a final drink, shook hands, and strode out through the swinging doors of the Silver Spur. Mounting their horses, they separated, each riding off in the direction of his home.

Their posted circulars drew seven gunmen, who signed on to act as bounty hunters, tracking down and arresting criminals for the promised rewards.

(1) The reward for a horse thief was \$60, for a cattle rustler \$55, for an armed robber \$40, for a claim jumper \$35, and for a lowdown card cheater \$25.

(2) During the ensuing month each bounty hunter arrested only three kinds of criminals and made exactly four arrests. No two bounty hunters had exactly the same distribution of arrests among the five kinds of criminals.

(3) Three hunters, one from each state, made the same total in rewards, earning more than the other four. Three other hunters, one from each state, earned identical total rewards (but less than the first three). The last bounty hunter, from Nebraska, made exactly \$10 less than any of the second group.

(4) Altogether, six horse thieves were apprehended.

(5) The bounty hunters making the most money were Frank, Mr. McNally, and one of the men from Kansas. They did not include Karl or Mr. Snyder.

(6) The middle income hunters were Ike, Mr. Ryder, and one of the men from Colorado. They did not include Larry or Mr. Peters.

(7) Mr. Queen apprehended the most horse thieves, Mr. O'Hara (who operated in Colorado) the most cattle rustlers, and Mr. Snyder the most armed robbers.

(8) Jack did not arrest a single card cheater; Mr. Norris did not arrest a claim jumper; and neither of them caught an armed robber.

(9) Harry made more money than George and boasted of his success to Mr. Queen, the other bounty hunter in his state.

(10) Ike is in a different state from Mr. Norris. Neither of them operates in Kansas.

*Where were the most horse thieves caught? Where were the most cattle rustlers apprehended? And what was the most prevalent crime for which arrests were made in all three states combined?*

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See page 123 for the solution to the March puzzle.

# SOMEBODY WALKED OVER MY GRAVE

DeLoris Stanton Forbes





**Y**ou wouldn't believe what goes on in cemeteries. You kind of have to be there.

I am there—often. It's because I live right next door to Holyhood Memorial Park. As a matter of fact, my family lived here even before they started the cemetery; the Martinsons (I was a Martinson before I married a Persimmons) go back a couple of hundred years living here on Grove Street. According to family records, old Phineas Martinson took up farming the acreage back in the late 1700's just after the Revolutionary War. Matter of fact, this end of the cemetery was once Martinson land. So I not only live right next door to the cemetery, it's more like by the grace of my family folks are buried there.

You might even say I live *in* the cemetery I'm there so often. The main reason I visit is because of my dear departed husband Eddie, formally Edward Cecil Persimmons the third. And because of my dear departed-this-life-too-early son Teddy, formally Edward Cecil Persimmons the fourth. Most of my friends have passed on as well, so where else would I go when I want to feel loved? To Holyhood Memorial Park, that's where. I can get in anytime I like despite the tall fence and the gates that close at dusk. I just walk

through my back yard, slip through a gap in the tall yew hedge, and there I am, in my home away from home. That's what it is, my home away from home. The abode of those nearest and dearest.

I tried staying at home. I realize there are those who would think it kind of strange, me talking to tombstones, but that just shows their ignorance, doesn't it? Anyway, as I say, I tried staying at home, but my eyes aren't what they used to be so I can't read so well any more, and the programs on the television are definitely not to my taste, so what was I to do? I thought Eddie might have an idea, so I went to ask.

"Naked people on the tube, you say?" Eddie chuckled. "Well, what do you know? Seems I was dispatched from this vale of tears a mite too soon."

"Don't tease, Eddie. You always were an awful teaser. You don't mind me coming around so much, do you? Seems like you're interested in what I've got to say even if nobody else is. The other day I was down at the grocery store—sorry, the supermarket—and all I was doing was talking to the man in the meat department—I won't call him the butcher 'cause I don't think he really deserves the title but he'll package up one pork chop for you instead of two or more, and



he's very accommodating. Name of Clement. So I was talking to Clement just casual-like and he seemed real interested and some man in a boss suit came by and told him to get back to work, so I took the hint and went on my way. Nobody has any time to just talk any more, Eddie. Isn't that the sad way of the world?"

"I'll listen to you, Eloise," says Eddie. "Tell me about everything, I don't get to see much from this position. Start with, let's see—what day is it? Is it spring or summer? Winter or ..."

"Autumn, Eddie. It's late September and the trees are so pretty, they're dying but they're beautiful with their leaves all red and gold and yellow. There's some spilled on your grave, can you look up and see? And there's some flowers I brought. Chrysanthemums. They're plastic, but they'll just last that much longer, especially with winter coming. Plastic chrysanthemums, to go with the season. Remember when the girls used to wear big yellow ones, real ones I mean, to football games on a Saturday afternoon? Yea, team, yea, team, rah, rah, rah ..."

"It's a nice comfortable day. The sun is shining and all I needed to throw over my shoulders is a sweater. My blue one,

remember my blue sweater, Eddie? You always said it matched my eyes. It's getting on to Columbus Day. Yes, I know, they say Columbus wasn't really the first to discover America after all, they say the Danes did or the Norwegians, one of the Viking countries, but old Christopher Columbo gets his day just the same in October and the Italo-American Veterans Society—you know, they've always been very active in our town—they march out to the cemetery and put fresh little flags in the graves of them that served in the wars. They look so nice and perky and patriotic, fluttering there in the little breeze. I'm sorry you don't have one, but of course you didn't go in any of the wars, did you? Too young for one and then when the next one came you'd married me and we had Teddy. Teddy never went either, he was just a little boy when ... but you know all that.

"I need to tell you about things you don't know. Like there are people in the cemetery today, three or four cars have gone by and one of them—well, you just wouldn't believe it, Eddie, one of them was a sight to behold. It wasn't a car actually, it was a van, you know, one of those almost-trucks like the milkman used to drive? This van was all painted black, even

the windows were black, they've got some kind of plastic stuff they spray on the windows now and you can't see in . . . and sitting on top of this van, tied on somehow, of course, was a great big huge—almost as big as a man, I'd say—bear. Stuffed, of course. Dark brown with a red kerchief around his neck. The funniest thing I've just about ever seen. If it comes back this way, I'll let you know. I just can't imagine what kind of man would drive around in a black van with a giant bear sitting on the top."

But the van didn't come back, at least not while I was there, and after awhile I began to get a little drowsy. It was getting on to nap time, so I excused myself and stopped at Teddy's grave to whisper, "I love you, baby," before I went off home to rest. This is the pattern of my day. Breakfast, the news (so I can tell Eddie what's going on in the world even though it's too too depressing), and then a visit to Holyhood. Often I take my lunch and I always take a folding campstool, I'm getting too old for sitting on tombstones. Besides, they're cold, and that's not good for my arthritis.

Then home for a nap. The early evening news comes with a cup of tea and a bit of Pepperidge Farm cake (very tasty for a storebought sweet), then

back to the cemetery. This time I take a few minutes to chat with some others I know there. Ella Evans. Ella is, was, a very sweet woman, but she's not terribly bright so we just exchange greetings and I tell her about the weather. Charles Smith. He was once my beau, I don't tell Eddie about my visits to Charles, that's just between Charles and me. Well, a girl's got to have some secrets, doesn't she? Just kidding. Stella Owen-son. Stella's kind of interesting, she was a cook in a restaurant out on the turnpike, got shot in a holdup one night, and died with her apron on. Felicia Benvenuto, she was the vamp of the neighborhood, doesn't she sound like a femme fatale? I try to get her to tell me if Eddie ever played around, but she's very closemouthed is Felicia. And there's others. I've had the acquaintance of a good many people at Holyhood, but there's just one of me and so many of them. I do what I can so they don't feel neglected, but the plastic flowers only go to Eddie and Teddy. I have to draw the line somewhere.

I have special clothes that I wear at special times. This time of the year it's the blue sweater (because of my eyes). The beige silk pongee frock that I wore coming back from the hospital the day we brought Teddy home.

(That fine old fabric holds up so well if you take good care of it!) The pale pink scarf at my neck pinned with Eddie's old diamond-headed stickpin that he always used on his tie but that I didn't let them bury with him. It meant a lot to me, I kept it to remember him by.

A stickpin? Yes, I know they're terribly old fashioned, but this is such a nice one. It's three, maybe four inches long with a nice sharp point that slips through so easily, never damages the fabric. And that beautifully cut gem capping it off, how nice it used to look on the tie. So much more tasteful than those tacky tie tacks—and more useful as well. A pin to hold a hat on. A pretty adornment for a lady's blouse. So many things can be done with a well-made stickpin.

Where was I? Oh yes. After my evening visit I go home for a cup of hot bouillon and then to bed. I hardly ever go back in the middle of the night, only when something is really bothering me. Then I've been known to show up at midnight or even later. Wakes Eddie up, I know. But he's got nothing else to do but rest, that's what it says on his tombstone: HERE LIES EDWARD CECIL PERSIMMONS III, *At eternal rest, Thank God.* Dignified, my choice of words. A well-chosen epitaph. Teddy's is: EDWARD CE-

CIL PERSIMMONS IV, *Suffer the Little Children Who Go Too Soon.*

Days pass, pretty much the same only the weather changes, we get a nip in the air, and I have to wear my in-between seasons raincoat. Comes Columbus Day and there's lots of activity at Holyhood. Whole families bearing potted plants (they probably won't get enough water and will die if they don't freeze first) and fancy permanent arrangements. Then the marching veterans show up with the flags, and even a drum and bugle corps marches through. The drum and bugle corps are young and don't look as though they have a thought about who lies beneath the browning grass, but then young people never believe in death, do they? Not really. I happened to notice the black van with the bear again and I thought he must have relatives here, he may be strange (after all, who straps a bear to his car roof?) but he seems to be a caring soul. I told Eddie and he said, "Well, maybe. Has Teddy seen the bear? He ought to get a boot out of that."

"Yes, I brought it to his attention." I spoke somewhat stiffly. I don't like Eddie to refer to Teddy. It's all right if I do, after all I'm his mother and it's my privilege, but I don't like it when

Eddie does. It brings back bad memories.

I changed the subject. "The Jenkinsons have moved away. That's the last of the old neighbors, I think they went into a retirement home. New people have moved into a couple of houses, I haven't met them, they seem to have a lot of children. The street's full of children these days. Some of them are very noisy."

"Hey, Halloween's just around the corner. You better stock up on apples and stuff."

"Candy, that's what they want these days. Do you know, some people put razor blades into the candy bars they hand out? I swear I don't know what this world is coming to. Razor blades! And pins and needles! So mean, so cruel. We never did things like that, Eddie. Even when the Stanley boys threw rotten eggs at our windows. Remember the Stanley boys? I guess they must be close to middle-aged now. Wonder what ever happened to them."

"Probably serving time in jail someplace. Punks, that's what they were, punks. If they'd been my kids, I would have whipped their backsides till they bled ..."

"You shouldn't talk like that, Eddie." I stood, folded my campstool.

"You going home so soon?" His

tone was a distinct whine, so familiar.

"Yes. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Aw . . . Eloise, I was only talking. You know how I run off at the mouth sometimes."

"Yes, I know. Good day, Eddie." And I marched away like the drum and bugle corps, pausing only to whisper, "Teddy, my little love, I'll see you tomorrow. Your mama loves you, baby." Baby. A word often heard these days. In song, in conversation. Everybody it seems is a baby. But Teddy was my baby. My only baby.

I didn't go to the cemetery at all on primary election day. Not because it was Primary Day, although it did take me all morning to walk to the polling place and back, I believe in exercising my franchise. I tell Eddie that I vote Republican just as he did, but right after he passed on, I changed my registration to Democrat. I'd rather be an independent because that's what I am, independent, but if I did that, I couldn't vote in the primaries. Sometimes I wish I were back voting Republican because they have more interesting choices sometimes, but I won't go back to voting Republican because Eddie was so adamant about it and I don't think anybody should tell anybody else how to vote, do you? Anyway, I didn't go to the cemetery that

day because it also happened to be Teddy's birthday and I just couldn't bear to be reminded of Teddy's die day on Teddy's birthday.

But hard as I tried, the events came back and played across my ceiling while I lay in my bed with my eyes closed, I saw more with my eyes closed than I did with them open.

Teddy in his little red corduroy overalls and his yellow curls. Teddy reaching up to me and smiling. Teddy walking now, a little unsteadily but with a determined gait. Teddy getting into everything, pulling books out of the bookcase, plants off the windowsill, Eddie's experiments off his workbench, his precious invention scheduled to make him famous, to make us rich, the mixture that took years to develop, the formula that would create a kind of plastic never seen before, a plastic that would revolutionize the entire industry . . . I'm quoting Eddie, I never knew how effective his schemes were, none had ever worked before, he'd simply lived with me at home off Papa's legacy and created. That's what Eddie was, a creator. Except this day. This dreadful day. When Teddy in all his innocence tugged, and glass shattered and thunder roared, and Thor's fist like a hammer swung from the end of Eddie's arm . . . and the

world crashed into a million pieces. None of them plastic.

This wouldn't do, wouldn't do at all. I got out of bed and turned on the television. In honor of soon-to-be Halloween they were showing a horror film, something about a nightmare on Elm Street. There must be an Elm Street in every town in the entire U.S., I figure. It looked like a very scary picture. I turned it off, I don't care for contrived unease. The moon was almost full, I could see it beaming down on the land, on the cemetery. I felt a longing to be there among the marble statues and the granite columns where the grass was always mowed and the world was a quiet, restful place, but I couldn't go this night. Not in my present mood. So I heated some milk and laced it with rice wine Eddie'd made before he died (must be close to ten years old now, it packs a punch) and that knocked me out, sent me to dreamless dreamland. Thank God.

On Halloween I wore my costume. Now that we again had youngsters in the neighborhood, I thought it would be most appropriate. The children, even the Stanley boys, had always gotten a thrill when I'd opened the door in my wicked witch ensemble. Back in those days, of course, I had to use a lot of

makeup to create the illusion, nowadays it was a great deal easier ha-ha as Eddie used to say after he'd made a comical remark.

I'm not certain today's young people have the same sense of wonder that yesterday's youth had. The ones who came to my door stared and backed off when I answered. When I'd given them their little bag of goodies and closed the door, I watched them leave, saw them gather at the end of my sidewalk, whisper among themselves and look back. I could almost read their lips. "Crazy old bat!" I swear one of them said that.

I opened the door to tell them, "I'm in the spirit. Don't you see? It's Halloween." But they ran away and hardly anyone came after that.

I waited until almost midnight before I turned off the porch light. The bags of candy I had left over, someone would enjoy them if only I knew who, but everybody I knew lived in the cemetery. I went there carrying my basket of candies. I'd leave one on every grave as far as they went, a Halloween gift for All Hallows' Eve.

I saved the best two for my dear ones, the biggest for Teddy. I'd just placed it on his stone when lights flashed across the grass, moved to me and past me, then back again. Startled, I

froze and tried to see behind the light, no, lights, there were two. They were headlights.

"Well, well, well," said a voice that might have come from the grave. "What we got here, Henry? What we got here?"

I blinked. "I'm Eloise Persimmons. Who are you?" I moved so as to get out of the glare, to see better. I made out the shape of a vehicle, it wasn't a car, it was bigger than that, it was boxy and blacker than the blackness, it was a van and on the top I could make out the figure of a giant bear.

"A witch," said the voice. "A real genu-wine witch. My mama told me there'd be days like this." And he giggled. I suspected he'd been drinking, he sounded as though he had.

"Who are you?" I repeated. "Is Henry your bear?"

"The witch wants to make your acquaintance, Henry. Say hello to the lady . . . no, I ain't got that right, have I? A witch ain't a lady. Or is she?" A large dark shadow moved away from the van's side, came toward me. "What sex are you, witch? Male? Or female? I like female witches best. Me and Henry. That's our preference." Another giggle. I almost expected him to say ha-ha.

I stepped toward him, I needed to know what he looked like. Was he young? He sounded on the youthful side. "If you don't

tell me your name, I won't know what to call you. Would you like some candy?" I held out the bag. "It's Halloween."

"Candy?" This time it wasn't a giggle, it was a full-fledged laugh. "It ain't candy I want, witch. It ain't candy."

"All right, if you won't tell me your name, I'll simply call you Henry's friend. Where do you and Henry come from? I've seen your van here in the cemetery, it appears to have out-of-state plates."

We'd both stopped moving, stood now about a dozen feet apart. He was, as I've noted, heavysset and big. Part of his face looked darker than the rest, I judged he had a beard. I couldn't make out his eyes, his expression. I particularly wanted to see his eyes, you can tell so much from a person's eyes. And teeth. Yes, teeth are very revealing.

"Henry and me? We're from everywhere, ain't we, Henry? We met up at a carnival a long time ago, a carnival in . . . where was that carnival, Henry? I've clean forgot. But I'll bet they haven't forgotten us, have they, Henry? No sirree." A string of giggles that vanished like little balloons in the purple-black air.

Eddie said, "What's going on up there?"

"It's the man with the bear," I told him.

The man with the bear took a couple of steps toward me. "What? Who you talkin' to?"

"What man with what bear?"

"I'm speaking to my husband. Here." I gestured. To Eddie I said, "I told you. The van with the bear on the top. He's here."

"Your husband?" Henry's friend came closer once more. "You talkin' to a dead man?"

I could smell Henry's friend, I decided he'd not bathed in some time. "Yes. My husband Eddie. We have long chats."

"Mama! Mama!"

I turned. "Teddy, honey. Mama's here. I'm talking to a man with a big beautiful bear. The bear's name is Henry. He's a stuffed bear, remember you had a small bear once. We called your bear Binky."

"I want my bear! I want Binky!"

"Now, Teddy, don't cry. I'm afraid Binky has gone his own way, but now Henry's here—would you like to play with Henry?"

"You flipped your wig, old lady? Who you talkin' to now? Your dead kid, I suppose?" Henry's friend was very close now, he was large, too. And somehow generally unpleasant. It was an aura he gave off, sour sweat maybe, or unclean underwear, or both.

"You get that guy out of here,



Eloise," Eddie ordered. "He's bad news."

"Mama! Mama! Want Henry! Want the bear!"

"Would you mind taking Henry off the van so my little boy can see him?" I asked politely.

"What? What you talkin' about? I don't take Henry off the van, no time, no way. What you talkin' about?"

"But you must take him down sometimes. What about when it rains? Do you just leave him there to get drenched?"

"Eloise! I told you—get that louse outa here. He's bad news, I tell you."

Henry's friend thought something was funny. "Get drenched. That's a hot one. You're a nutcake, Miz Witch, you know that? A real live nutcake." He reached out and grabbed hold of my arm. "Got any money on you?"

"Eloise!" Eddie's voice was louder than I'd ever heard it.

"Mama!"

"Money? I don't bring money to the cemetery. Suppose I give you some money, would you take Henry down off the van? I'd guess you've been living here in the cemetery. Would I guess right? You're some kind of street person except that you've got a van. So if I give you money, will you take Henry down? For my little boy?"

He put his face close to mine, he had little beady eyes and a

big nose, lots of scraggly black beard. "How much money?"

I drew back as far as I could with him holding onto my arm. "How much would it take?"

He let go of me. "It's a lot of trouble taking the bear down. It'd cost you . . ." I could see he was trying to make his mind work " . . . say a hundred bucks. Is it worth a hundred bucks to you?" He had me by the arm again.

"All right," I said. "Take him down, and I'll bring you a hundred dollars."

"Eloise!" I almost expected Eddie to burst from the ground beneath my feet.

He studied my face in the glare of the van lights. "How do I know you'll bring me the dough? Where do you have to go to get it?"

"Mama! Mama!"

I gestured behind me. "Just over there. I live just over there behind the yew hedge."

He gave it some thought, it took a while. In addition to the alcohol haze, he didn't seem too bright to begin with. "You go get it, I'll take him down."

I shook my head and my witch's hat almost fell off, good thing I had it anchored with Eddie's stickpin. "You take him down, I'll get the money."

"A hundred ain't enough." He shook me. "Two hundred."

"For God's sake, Eloise!"

"You're a welcher."

He took hold of my other arm and shoved me up against Eddie's stone. "You ain't so bad lookin' for an old babe. Behind all that witch outfit. Maybe I'll take the hundred and a few kind words." He leered, his breath was foul. "What do you think of that? Widow lady, ain't you? You ought to be hungry for a little action."

"Two hundred dollars," I said. "Okay."

He let go of me. "Go get it," he demanded.

I shook my head. "After you take Henry down."

He hesitated, then backed off in the direction of the vehicle. "You could call the cops."

"Why would I do that? I want Henry for my child. If I call the police, I won't get what I want. If you do as I ask, you'll get what you want. It's very simple, Henry's friend. Untie Henry and take him down."

More hesitation. Then, "You're just crazy enough to mean it." He went to the side of the van, began to pull at ropes, to loosen ropes. I couldn't make out the entire procedure but he was getting Henry down, he was freeing the bear.

At the end Henry fell to the ground with a thump. "Is he hurt?" I asked.

"What d'you mean, is he hurt? 'Course he ain't hurt. He's

stuffed, ain't he? How can you hurt something that's only stuffed?"

"Sit him up."

"Eloise," Eddie was speaking softly now.

"Huh?"

"I said sit him up. There. That's more dignified. Now I'll keep my part of the bargain. You carry Henry over here, he is kind of heavy, isn't he, well, maybe not so heavy as bulky, and lean him against this tombstone, the one with the cherub on top, see. By the time you've done that I'll be back with the money."

"Listen, Miz Witch . . ."

"Yes."

"If you pull somethin', I'll get you for it, just remember. And a van makes a good battering ram, you ever thought of that? For knocking over tombstones . . . so no funny stuff . . ."

"Bring Henry over here," I said. "See, Teddy, Henry's friend is bringing him now. Don't you fret, baby, Mama will be back, very soon Mama will be back."

When I returned, Henry was propped against Teddy's stone, and Henry's friend was smoking a cigarette that reeked almost as much as he. Such a totally unpleasant man, how Henry could have ended up with such a friend was beyond me. Poor Henry, strapped to

that van top in rain or blazing sun, poor Henry . . .

Henry's friend came to attention when he saw me. "You got it?" he asked. His beady little eyes gleamed.

I nodded, held out my hand. "Come and get it," I said.

When he came near, near enough, I reached up and drove Eddie's stickpin straight into his ear canal, all the way until only the diamond twinkled in its new cave, and stepped nimbly aside as he shrieked and fell. I'm good at this sort of acupuncture. I've had practice.

"I knew you were going to do that," said Eddie, "just like you did to me. You're pretty handy with that stickpin, Eloise."

"Thanks."

"Mama! Mama!"

"There, there, Teddy. Now you have a friend to play with, see Henry? Mama will bring him here every day and you can play and then Mama will take him home and let him sleep in your little bed and it will be almost like having her Teddy again . . ."

Yes, as I say, strange things happen in graveyards. You really have to be there.

FICTION

# Wild Horses

Sam Pizzo

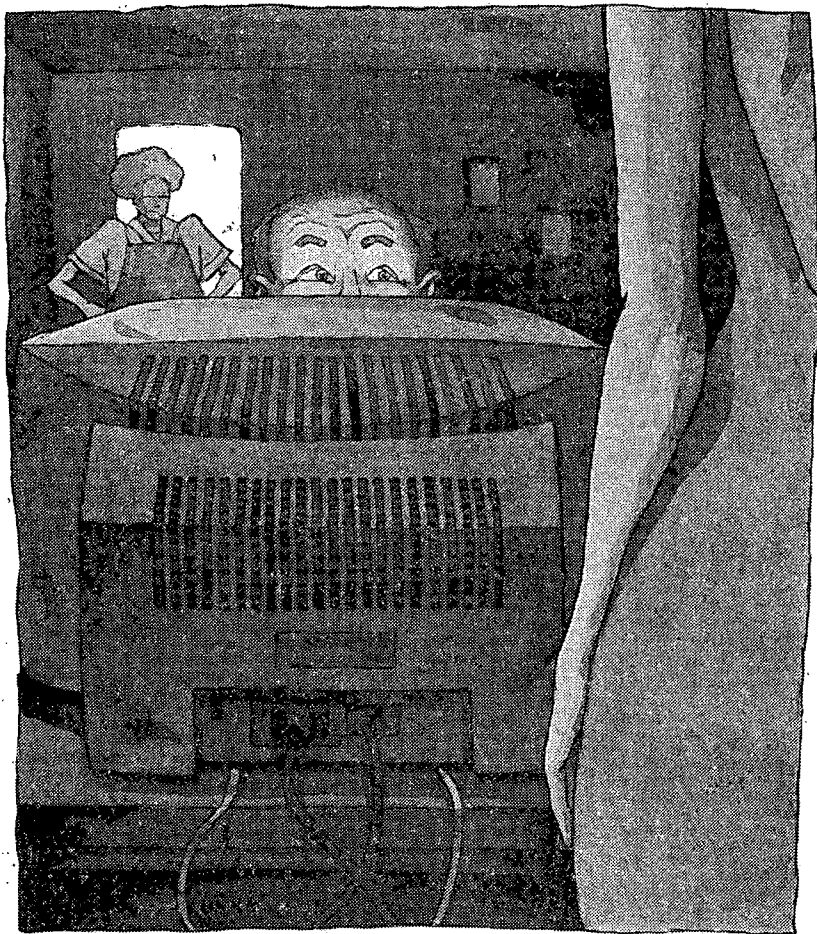


Illustration by Jim Adams

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/96

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**I**n the chat rooms on the Internet, Wendell was anything he wanted to be. Sitting at his computer, he was a fighter pilot, a brain surgeon, a trash collector, a university professor, whatever tickled his fancy. Yesterday he was a lifeguard who refused, with modesty, to tell his chat room companions how many lives he had saved but admitted reluctantly there were many. The day before, he was the CEO of a Dutch multinational corporation who resigned his position and donated his stock to the company rather than lay off two thousand employees. The Internet had freed Wendell from the constraints and boredom of everyday life.

Of course, he was living a lie. Wendell knew it was wrong, but he wasn't hurting anybody, was he? He never gave advice to people online, and he never asked anything of them. He simply enjoyed being something he was not for a few minutes each day. If people online asked for advice or questioned his credentials, he would say his computer had a malfunction, or he had received an urgent call from the Vatican on his dedicated phone line. He would sign off, wait a few minutes, then sign back on and look for a different chat room.

Wendell signed on, as he did every evening, at seven P.M. His computer announced that he had mail. His wife asked, as she always did, who it was from. Wendell answered, as he always did, that it was probably somebody trying to sell him something.

Wendell guarded the password that allowed him access to the Internet. He had not written it down for fear it would fall into the hands of his wife, and she would peek into his private world. Wendell's password was committed to memory, and wild horses couldn't drag . . .

"Don't you go buying anything," said Wendell's wife. "The bills are due in a few days, and I need a new dress for the women's Jamboree and Fashion Show, and my hair is a mess, and we could afford a lot of things if you had a decent job and . . . quack, quack, quack. . ."

Wendell tuned her out. He opened his electronic mail. It was from somebody named Tanya. Wendell had never received mail from her before, nor had he sent any. It probably *was* somebody wanting to sell him something. But Wendell always enjoyed receiving e-mail, even junk e-mail:

*Dear Wendell:*

*You're probably wondering who I am. Well, we've never met and we've never spoken, but we see each other almost every day. I am twenty-five years old and studying to be a*

*fashion model. I think bald is beautiful and I'm told that older men are exciting lovers. I dream of you all the time—if you know what I mean. Don't be surprised if I tap you on the shoulder some day and say, "Hi, I'm Tanya." I'm going to bed now—thinking of you.*

*Love, Tanya*

"... quack... quack... and quack..."

Wendell committed the letter to memory, including the punctuation, then he trashed it. He had the most exciting secret of his life, and there must be no chance that somebody else would read it. Wendell reread the letter in his mind. He reread it again and again in his mind. He was amused by her choice of words, tickled by her syntax, and overwhelmed by her punctuation. Wendell was in...

"Quack, quack... Wipe that silly grin off your face. There are a lot of things you could do besides playing with that computer. The screen door has a hole in it, the cupboard doors are loose, the grass needs to be cut and... quack, quack, quack..."

Wendell walked slowly through a typical day, analyzing and cataloguing all the attractive young women he usually saw. There was the young woman who lived right down the street, the tall one with the puckered lips and long curly hair. Wendell thought of the many times he'd wanted to toot his horn and call out a cheery good morning with a casual wave, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Maybe she was...

The tall young woman with the puckered lips and long curly hair entered Wendell's newly purchased townhouse. She approached Wendell, a provocative smile forming and reforming on her lips. Her hair bounced with each step. She stopped inches in front of him. Her breath was minty fresh.

"Hi," she breathed, "I'm Tanya."

Wendell had an urge to crush his lips on hers, but...

"I'll scrunch down like this," said Tanya, "and if you stand on tip-toe..."

Wendell tossed his crystal champagne glass in the fireplace, flipped up the collar of his Italian silk smoking jacket, and, standing on tippytoe, pulled Tanya close, crushing his lips on hers.

With a musical sigh Tanya swooned onto the antique Victorian sofa, the back of her hand pressed to her forehead.

Wendell placed another log in the fireplace and lighted his pipe



with the embers. Slipping his hand into the inside pocket of his smoking jacket, he withdrew a diamond-studded necklace and draped it around Tanya's neck.

Tanya reswooned.

Wendell blew a smoke ring.

"Oh, Wendell, Wendell," she muttered, "you really know how to make a young woman feel . . ."

"Quack, quack, quack . . . Daddy said you'd never amount to anything. All you want to do is sit at that computer. Don't be surprised if you come home some night and find it in the garbage. If you spent your time thinking about how to improve yourself, you could get a better job, we'd be able to take vacations like other people . . . quack, quack, and quack. . . ."

Wendell shut down his computer, put on his jammies, and went to bed hoping to dream dreams of Tanya.

In the morning Wendell dressed quickly, ate a bowl of bran flakes and half a grapefruit. He fired up the Rambler station wagon and headed for work. Wendell's car was not flashy like the cars young people drove, but it got him from point A to point B and it was paid for. Of course, it had a small oil leak and the exhaust produced a lot of smoke and Wendell was planning to pin a blanket to the upholstery to hold in the stuffing, but other than that, she was as good as new, except for the paint.

Wendell stopped at a red traffic light.

*Honk, honk, honk!*

Hold your horses, okay? So Wendell made a mistake, okay? So the light was green and not red when Wendell stopped, okay? And honking your horn won't do any good because now the light is red, okay? And he and Wendell were going to sit there until it turned green again, okay?

When the light did turn green again, Wendell goosed the engine of the Rambler, leaving the impatient driver behind him in a cloud of smoke.

Wendell maneuvered into the left lane to make his usual left turn onto Taylor Street, his left turn signal lights flashing.

*Honk, honk!*

Hold your . . .

*Honk, honk, blaaaaaat!*

. . . horses, okay? Wendell could have made that left turn safely, okay? But the oncoming Cadillac appeared to be moving faster than



it really was, okay? And he could just cool his heels for a while, okay?

*Honk, honk, beep, beep, blaaaaaat!*

The young woman standing on the corner, the one with the blonde hair, miniskirt, and large, you know, was on that corner every morning. Maybe she was . . .

Wendell instructed his chauffeur to complete the left turn and ease the limousine to the curb. The young woman with the blonde hair, miniskirt, and large, you know, was smiling now and blowing kisses. Wendell told his chauffeur to hop out and open the door for her.

She slid in gracefully. Wendell could feel the warmth of her thigh pressing against his. Her breath was minty fresh.

"Hi," she breathed, "I'm Tanya."

Wendell excused himself, his cellular phone was ringing. It must be Hong Kong returning his call. If she would look in the little pocket on the back of the front seat, she would find a diamond-studded necklace, just a little something he had picked up for her at Tiffany's.

With a musical sigh Tanya swooned on the Moroccan leather seat, the back of her hand pressed to her forehead.

Wendell showed her his jar of Grey Poupon.

"Oh, Wendell, Wendell," she muttered, "you really know how to make a young woman feel . . ."

*Honk, honk! Beep, beep! BLAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!*

Wendell completed his left turn onto Taylor Street when he was good and ready, and a few minutes later he was at the office for another day of the same-old-same-old, unless of course Tanya was one of the young women at the office.

There were only two young women in the office, the boss's new secretary and the new salesperson. If Wendell had to guess which one was Tanya, he would choose the salesperson. She had a cute way of snapping her chewing gum, and Wendell could tell she liked him by the way she refused to look at him.

But Wendell had work to do. He had accounts to balance, statements to reconcile, checks to write and more accounts to balance and more statements to reconcile and more of the same-old-same-old.

"May I have your attention," said the loudspeaker. "Mr. Leroy

wants all employees in the lunchroom at eight fifteen for a brief meeting. Doughnut holes will be served compliments of Mr. Leroy."

Wendell knew there was no such thing as a "brief" business meeting. He wished he could be left alone to do his work. He never did understand the rhetoric of business meetings. The language of business, it seemed to Wendell, consisted of random words filling the air with no meaning or logical sequence. The words sounded meaningful, but when Wendell asked himself what was said, he didn't have a clue.

Mr. Leroy was stout but impeccably creased and starched with perpetual beads of perspiration on his upper lip. "As members of the Central Division," he said, "we should be proud of last month's performance. Let's give ourselves a hand."

Clap, clap, clap.

So far so good. Wendell had no problem understanding that. They made money last month.

"I want to thank you personally," continued Mr. Leroy, "for proactively reducing variable and fixed costs and . . ."

Proactively? What the hell did that mean? Wendell had looked it up in his dictionary after the last meeting. It wasn't there.

" . . . implement new strategic initiatives . . . revitalize our sales force . . . centralized processes . . . oink, oink, oink. . . "

Sales force? Did he say sales force?

" . . . Capitalize on new business trends and opportunities . . . oink, oink, and oink . . . "

There she was, the new salesperson, leaning seductively against the refrigerator, chewing.

" . . . identifying leadership team . . . reorganization . . . oink, oink, oink. . . "

The new salesperson was staring at Wendell, a playful smile forming and reforming on her lips. She sashayed through the maze of lunchroom tables and chairs, her eyes never leaving Wendell's, her long blonde hair bouncing with each step. She stopped inches in front of Wendell. Her breath was minty fresh.

"Hi," she breathed, "I'm Tanya."

Wendell took Tanya's hand gently but firmly in his and led her to the parking lot. He opened the passenger door of his red Ferrari convertible, and she slid in gracefully, giving his hand a playful squeeze. Wendell liked it when his girlfriends squeezed his hand like that.

Wendell slipped his hand into the pocket of his English tweed jacket, the one with the elbow patches, and produced a large roll of one hundred dollar bills. He peeled two of them off the roll and handed them to Tanya.

"Are we . . ." she stammered " . . . are you really going to take me to . . ."

Wendell smiled and lowered the back of Tanya's seat to near horizontal, anticipating that she might swoon.

" . . . to . . . to . . . Six Flags?"

Wendell nodded, and the Ferrari's engine roared to life.

With a musical sigh Tanya swooned in the seat that Wendell had so thoughtfully lowered, the back of her hand pressed to her forehead.

Wendell adjusted his Italian silk scarf, leaving one end five times longer than the other, anticipating that it would flow behind him as they sped down the highway.

"Oh, Wendell, Wendell," she muttered, "you really know how to make a young woman feel . . ."

" . . . oink, oink . . . extended leadership group . . . performance objectives . . . implementation of technological enhancements . . . oink, oink, and furthermore, oink."

Wendell's day was slow in passing. He took his morning break, his lunch break, and his afternoon break. In between he totaled columns, produced reports, and wrote checks, the same-old-same-old.

Wendell left the office at five sharp and drove home, stopping only twice to add water to the radiator of the Rambler. When he got home, he took a small brown paper bag from his briefcase, as usual, smoothed it out, as usual, and laid it in the drawer in the kitchen, as usual, for reuse the next day.

Normally Wendell would have spent half an hour after work tending the roses in the tiny back yard of their mobile home. But this evening he sat at the computer and signed on to the Internet as soon as he got home.

"You expecting something special?" asked his wife.

Wendell's usual routine was to sign on at seven P.M., after the evening news. He had aroused her suspicions.

"You expecting another e-mail from Tanya?" she asked.

How did she know about Tanya? There was no way she could have seen that letter. Wendell's access code was known only to him.

Besides, she knew nothing about computers, and he had trashed the message so nobody else would see it.

"That's right, you worm. You trashed it so I wouldn't know about your little affair."

Tanya must have called her.

"Nobody called me, you demented virus."

She must have bumped into Tanya at the grocery store.

"I didn't bump into her anywhere, you cockroach."

Then how did she know?

"I know because *I* am Tanya."

Wendell couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed so loud or so hard. He removed his horn-rimmed glasses and brushed the tears from his eyes and cheeks. She couldn't possibly be Tanya.

"Why not?" she demanded.

Well, for openers, Tanya was young and pretty and sensitive and loving and kind and gentle and full of life and exciting to be with and . . .

"You know all that from one little e-mail letter?"

Damn right! His wife couldn't be Tanya. She didn't even know how to turn on the computer.

"That's true," she said. "I don't know the first thing about computers, but I have a friend who does. She's on the Internet, too, and she wrote the letter for me. I told her what to say, and she sent the letter to you from her computer. I wanted to see if you'd tell me about it, if you'd be faithful."

That couldn't be. There had to be a Tanya. His wife was screwing with his mind. Without Tanya he was a ghost, with her he was alive and young.

Wendell's wife recited Tanya's letter from memory, including the punctuation, stopping on occasion to ask if it sounded familiar. She folded her arms across her chest and smiled.

Wendell was not one to lose his temper. He rose from the computer and walked to the kitchen. He checked the knives for sharpness. He made stabbing and slashing movements with each knife and decided that the large carving knife had the best grip.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you?"

Wendell went to the toolshed. He picked up a small hatchet, checked it for sharpness. He swung it several times. The hatchet was comfortable in his hand. He placed it on the kitchen counter next to the carving knife.

"You won't get away with it," said his wife. "I'll scream."

Wendell rummaged in the bedroom closet. He found his .38 revolver. It was loaded. He released the safety and placed it on the kitchen counter between the knife and hatchet.

"You'll fry in hell."

It was difficult for Wendell to make decisions. He paced the kitchen floor, hands clasped behind his back, trying to decide which of the weapons would be best for the job. He decided against using any of the weapons—too cold, too impersonal. Wendell would have to kill her in a more intimate manner. He felt he owed her that after twenty-five years of marriage. The right way would be to throttle her. Wendell placed both hands around his wife's throat and squeezed.

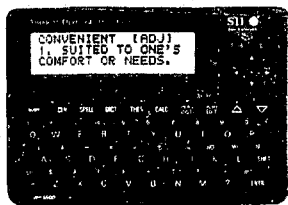
"Qua . . . ack . . . qua . . ."

Wendell heard the doorbell ring. At least, he *thought* it rang. Wendell released the hold he had on his wife's throat.

" . . . ack . . ."

The bell *had* rung. An exotic young woman with hoop earrings and dark lips was standing in the living room. She must have let herself in. Now she was slinking toward Wendell, a seductive smile forming and reforming on her lips. Her long black hair swished with each step. She stopped inches in front of Wendell. Her breath was minty fresh.

# MAIL ORDER MALL



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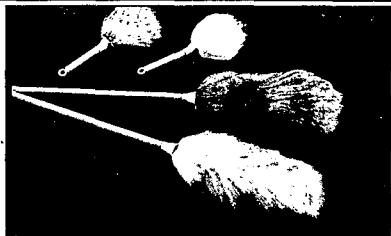


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FICTION

# LARRY CALLED

## Linda Evans



*Illustration by Richard Loehle*

*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 4/96*

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I couldn't concentrate on putting the research in order so Sara could get it typed into the computer later. The woman client in Mr. Porter's office was talking so loud she could probably be heard in the next building.

"It's always 'have him call Larry,'" she said. She had one of those smoker's voices that made her voice seem to come from way down in her chest.

I heard a soft murmur, Mr. Porter's reply no doubt, and then the door to his office opened. "Leigh, would you come in here a moment."

Curious, I slapped my papers down in a heap and trotted into my boss's office. He'd opened the blinds for a change, and sunlight striped his antique desk and the ample lap of the woman sitting next to it.

"Leigh, this is Mrs. Wheeler."

"Hello," I said pleasantly, turning to face the woman. She barely nodded. Her lip curled slightly as though I was something nasty the dog had just brought in.

I fought back instant dislike. My ex-boyfriend often told me I needed to be more sympathetic to the suffering of others. So I tried. I reasoned that whatever had led the client to consult a private investigator was probably keeping her from acting friendly.

Mr. Porter waved me to the armchair across from Mrs. Wheeler, and I primly sat, tugging down the edges of my slightly too tight skirt. My boss turned his attention to a yellow legal pad on his desk. I couldn't stop myself from touching the dusty leaves of a potted fern beside me to see if it was real. Plastic, I decided, though a good imitation of the real thing.

"Leigh."

I jumped and just managed to stop myself from jamming my hands guiltily behind my back in case Mr. Porter disapproved of my doing a reality check on his greenery. "Ah, yes?" I said.

"Mrs. Wheeler has rather an interesting case, and as we'd discussed the possibility of your helping me out in some of my investigations—in a minor way—I thought this would be a good time to start."

"In a minor way," I echoed. I hadn't exactly warmed to the idea last week. I worked for Mr. Porter part time and attended FSU, studying for my degree in criminology, most of the rest of the time. But I had no intention of becoming a detective for Porter's Investigations. Up to now my work in his office had been strictly research into city directories. I'd no idea what my boss did with the information I compiled. It was just a job.

"I thought my case would be

handled by a trained professional," Mrs. Wheeler said.

I raised an eyebrow and said in my haughtiest voice, "Mrs. Wheeler, I *am* a trained professional." I don't know why I said that, but it seemed to ease Mrs. Wheeler's doubts—a little.

"Then let's get down to facts." She leaned forward, gripping the arms of her chair. Her small eyes seemed to take on an extra-hard shine. "I'll tell you the story the same way I told your boss. About a month ago, my husband Richard started getting phone calls from someone named Larry. Richard is never home when Larry calls."

"So what does Larry want?"

Mrs. Wheeler raised a pudgy hand and scowled. "Don't interrupt. Larry never says what he wants. He just says, 'This is Larry. Have Richard give me a call.' But when I give Richard the message, he swears he doesn't know any Larry."

She sat back panting like a riled-up German shepherd. I contemplated asking her to go on but decided to let her cool off for a minute. She picked up a battered copy of *Field & Stream* from a lamp table and fanned herself.

"There," she said, tossing the magazine back in the general direction of the table and missing. "The little worm, the cheating

little street rat, is obviously lying."

"Larry?" I said stupidly.

"Of course not Larry. I don't even know Larry, whoever he is. Richard, the little street rat."

"Oh, your husband." I nodded about a hundred times. I was getting this mental image of a scrawny guy with big ears and a wispy rat's mustache.

Mr. Porter watched quietly, his gaze shifting from me to his client and back again. His hands were folded loosely on top of his desk instead of steepled the way they usually were when he spoke with women. Now he shifted slightly in his chair and straightened his red and green plaid tie, which didn't go at all with his blue shirt.

"So that's all you have to go on, Mrs. Wheeler? Someone is calling your husband?" he said.

"Isn't that enough?" Mrs. Wheeler flashed him a look of contempt.

Mr. Porter kept the client-investigator relationship intact with a pleasant smile. "Fine. I'll take the case as long as you agree to letting Leigh handle most of the actual investigation."

I sat up straighter and almost slid off the polished vinyl chair. "Me?"

"You can manage." Mr. Porter stood up and looked at his

watch. "I've an appointment. That divorce case."

"Sure. I'll finish the interview with Mrs. Wheeler," I said glumly. It was obvious that Mr. Porter wanted Mrs. Wheeler's money but didn't want to deal with her. Just throw all the unpleasant clients my way like I'm a garbage disposal, I thought.

"Call me Terri," Mrs. Wheeler said, getting up and then plunking herself down in Mr. Porter's chair as soon as he'd left.

"Okay. Terri." I held back a sigh.

Terri tossed me Mr. Porter's legal pad and his pen, and I caught both. I wrapped my fingers around the pen in writing position and looked at her expectantly.

"Richard is forty years old, five six in his shoes, one hundred forty pounds, balding, blue eyes, blond what's left of his hair, and not too bright if you know what I mean."

"No, what do you mean?" I said.

Her eyes flashed under brows left natural. "He lacks common sense," she snapped. "I have to give him detailed instructions on life. He can't even take the garbage out the right way without my explaining it."

I bit back an impulse to ask her what the right way to take out garbage was. Mr. Porter

would not approve of goading the clients.

"So now this Larry person is calling Richard, who pretends he doesn't know who it is. He's lying, of course. But Richard is even dumber than I thought if he thinks he can put one over on me."

"How do you know the call isn't perfectly innocent? I mean, has Richard ever given you cause for suspicion in the past?"

"You bet he has, sister. There was that time he came home late and told me he'd been working and all the time he'd stopped for drinks with a couple of those loser types he works with. As if I couldn't smell the liquor on his breath the minute he staggered in. And the time he ran into a mailbox and dented the car fender. He told me it was a hit-and-run in the Shoe Circus parking lot, but I got the truth from Myrtle Glynn, my neighbor. She witnessed the whole thing while she was out walking Missy, her Rottweiler."

"I see," I said, smiling in what I hoped was a calming way. It seemed the unfortunate Richard was clumsy as well as lacking in judgment. "And where does Richard work?"

"He's a salesman for Goodman Office Supplies. He sells to area businesses as well as to walk-in clients."

"That sounds like a nice job," I said.

"Sure. He makes decent money or I would have sent him back to the streets where he came from long ago, mark my words. But now . . ." Terri's eyes narrowed ominously. "He's up to something. If he's cheating on me, the world won't be big enough for him. Nobody crosses me and gets away with it."

I inched my chair backward in some kind of primitive self-protection move. "Uh, if Richard were up to something, wouldn't he try to hide it from you? I mean, why let this Larry have his phone number and keep calling to arouse your suspicions?"

She snorted. "Richard's not that deep, I tell you. He wouldn't be able to hide a book in a library."

I still thought she was worried about nothing, but I didn't tell her that. Mr. Porter had given me this case for my very own. He would not be pleased if I sent the client away unhappy. Besides, I was tired of poring over city directories until my shoulders cramped up and my eyes glazed over.

"All right," I said.

We shook hands. Terri's hand felt limp and damp, like raw liver. I tried not to shudder.

I'd spent a lot of spare time in the office waiting for Mr. Porter

to sign my paychecks and leafing through how-to-detect books. At least I had some idea of how to begin.

I drove my fifteen-year-old student starter car over to Goodman's Office Supplies to see if I could at least get a look at Richard Wheeler. I expected he'd be out on a sales call, but I spotted him right away from Terri's description. He was doing a demo with some oversized paper clips for a skinny lady in a flowered dress. I briefly considered asking him to show me something in a large stapler, but I realized that would be a dumb move.

Stupid, I thought, actually thumping myself on the head. If you intend to follow him or keep him under surveillance, you can't let him see you.

Following him was exactly what I intended. This was spring break. True, I'd be missing out on trips to Daytona, but I had to work anyway.

I expected it would take me an entire week of tailing Richard before he led me, presumably, to Larry's hideout and whatever illegal scheme the two of them were involved in up to their eyebrows. I waited in the shade of an oak tree for about an hour until my quarry emerged from the store. He clutched a black briefcase in one

hand and his car keys in the other.

I slid behind the wheel of my little blue Chevy and followed his Buick out of the parking lot. I glanced over at the passenger seat to make sure my camera was safe. It was. I'd belted it in to make sure. I figured I'd need it to photograph Richard in action for evidence.

By the end of the day, I was wishing I'd waited until five o'clock to start following Richard. After a long boring day of tailing him from one office to another, we ended up right back where we'd started—Goodman's. Richard took his briefcase inside and came back out without it.

I perked up for a few seconds until I saw him head south on Mill Street. He had to be going home. I followed at a discreet distance.

I might as well follow him home before I knock off, I thought. I'd like to see where he and Terri live.

The Wheelers' house was on Mill Street, where Richard pulled into the driveway. I just had time to see a modest brick house with lime green shutters. I had to keep moving down the street. I whipped my car into a U-turn at the next intersection and headed home. So much for my first day of detecting.

When I got in, I was hot, tired,

and in an extremely dangerous mood. I screamed at the cat for getting fur all over my skirt. When Joe-Warren came home from his job at the Burger King, I scowled at him and told him he smelled like fast food. Joe-Warren is a history major whose parents have never been able to agree on anything, including his name. He'd been trying to move in with me for months and had gotten as far as camping out in my living room most of the time, for which I charged him a hefty rent. No man sponges off me.

"What'd I do?" he asked plaintively. "I didn't get one speck of toothpaste on the mirror this morning."

"Stop whining," I snapped. "Whining is not an attractive quality in a man. And you know what you did."

"Excuse me," he replied. "I am not a psychic. I do not know what I did."

Since I didn't really know what he'd done either, other than be there, I refused to say another word. He sulked on his sleeping bag for the rest of the evening while I munched my way through a piece of stale veggie pizza that I didn't even bother to microwave, all the while thinking that this detective job was hard on my home life.

I went to work early the next morning, making sure to stomp around on my way out the door.



Joe-Warren whined about being waked up at the crack of dawn, and I told him to crawl back under his blankets and meditate on life's little cruelties.

Today I knew better than to waste my time following Richard on his office sales supply rounds. Besides, I was almost out of gas. I kept myself busy at the office with my usual city directories. I concentrated so hard that I'd gone through all of D and most of E in my latest directory by the time four o'clock rolled around. Then, much as I hated to, it was time to go after the street rat again. I practically crawled out to the parking lot. My car doesn't have luxuries like air conditioning, and the day was unseasonably hot. Sweat rolled down my face, and my hair, which needed cutting, hung down over my forehead in sticky brown strands. I should have felt hostile toward Richard, but it was Terri I would gladly have mowed down if she'd stepped in front of me.

It looked as though yesterday was here again when Richard hopped into his car, no briefcase in hand. "Oh, great," I muttered. I thrust out my jaw. "Going home to the wicked witch again, you poor slob."

I was following a little too closely as he headed down Mill Street again, and I backed off to let him into his driveway. My

heart rate must have doubled when he went right on by. I actually panted.

I even had to speed to keep him from disappearing over a hill. He continued on Mill Street for another three miles before suddenly jerking his car down a side street and pulling up in the driveway of a little white wooden house with a well-kept lawn and an oversupply of bright flowers on either side of the steps.

I kept on rolling down the street. I might have been new at the detective game, but even I knew better than to pull into the driveway behind him. By the time I got turned around and parked at the curb, I just had time to shakily unbelt my camera and point it at the door.

I got some long-range shots of Richard in the doorway with his arms wrapped around a scrawny blonde wearing red shorts and a white halter top. They disappeared inside, and I used up the rest of the film on the house and the mailbox, where the name C. Z. Mallory was clearly displayed.

A heavy feeling built in my stomach until I realized there was no way I'd be able to choke down the macaroni and cheese I'd planned to warm up for supper. I stopped at a one-hour photo place next to the mall and got my film developed. Then I



drove home to my apartment at a snail's pace. I let Joe Warren take me out to dinner at Krispy Kreme. He happily finished my meal when I could only manage half a glazed doughnut and a cup of milk. I rewarded him by not cutting him down for the rest of the evening, and I let him watch all those news journal shows about the latest celebrity scandals.

Mr. Porter was in when I stomped into the office the next morning. I tossed the packet of incriminating photos on his desk and waited, arms folded across my chest.

He examined them closely, even going so far as to peer at them with the official-looking magnifying glass he kept on his desk. A smile spread across his face.

"Good work, Leigh. Extremely good work for a woman."

I didn't challenge him about that last bit. Instead, I dropped into one of his guest chairs. I felt almost as though I was going to cry, and I haven't cried for years. Thank goodness I managed to push that urge back down where it came from.

"Mr. Porter—uh, I don't feel right about this."

I clasped and unclasped my damp hands and stared down at my shoes. The right one had a smudge on the toe.

"Don't feel right about what?"

Mr. Porter's left eyebrow slowly rose until it was high above the level of his glasses frame. "You solved a case in just two days."

"It all seems wrong. Mrs. Wheeler is an overbearing, obnoxious, mean woman. Mr. Wheeler seems quiet and inoffensive. Who can blame him for finding a little happiness on the side?"

My boss smiled at me benignly. "Leigh, honey. You're looking at this all wrong. First of all, you've never actually met either Mr. Wheeler or his little blonde babe, have you?"

"Well, no."

"How do you know they're so wonderful? How do you know they're not plotting to murder Terri Wheeler even as we speak?"

He lowered his voice ominously on the last phrase. I shivered.

"She probably deserves . . ."

Mr. Porter stopped me with a raised hand. "Who are we to pass judgment? Who are we to let vigilante justice rule? We were hired to do a job, and we did it. Case closed."

He steepled his fingers. Ordinarily I would have been tempted to steeple mine back at him, but now I slumped, deflated, in my chair.

"Later, Leigh, Sara will call Mrs. Wheeler and ask her to come in for a report on her case.

You will give her everything, including these pictures."

His eyes narrowed, and stayed that way, until I snapped, "Oh, all right."

I led Terri into Mr. Porter's office, which he'd graciously lent me for the dreaded meeting. She positively glowed when I showed her the pictures.

"Aha! The actual evidence in black and white," she shouted.

"Color," I said softly. "Kodak Gold."

"Whatever. The cheating little street rat is exposed to the light of day. My thanks to you for turning over the rock that hid him. You just wait until I get my hands on that little liar and his bimbo. Can you imagine? He called me yesterday and told me he had to go to a training session for a new line of typing paper after work. All the while he was horsing around with her." She made a chopping motion across her throat.

I swallowed hard. "Wait a minute. What about Larry and the mysterious phone calls?"

"Not a problem. Last night Larry called again, and I finally pinned him down. Turns out he was trying to get hold of another Richard Wheeler—some old guy who wanted to sell a boat. So it was all a false alarm."

"Oh." I got smaller and smaller in my chair.

After she left, I tried to convince Mr. Porter that we should notify the authorities. Terri had threatened at least twelve separate kinds of physical harm to her husband and the blonde, including frying them in oil and cutting important parts off their bodies with her new Ginsu knife.

Mr. Porter informed me that it was none of my business. "Our work with her is finished," he said, staring into the distance with a noble look on his narrow face. "She's just blowing off steam."

I couldn't help feeling responsible, though, for what I thought of as impending bodily harm to Mr. Wheeler and C. Z. Mallory, his girlfriend. I wondered if the cops would question me, or even arrest me as an accessory. Would my photos appear in tabloids across the country?

I agonized for two weeks until I couldn't take it any more. I was writing out my resume, debating with myself over whether Mr. Porter would accept one week's notice instead of two, when he strode up to my desk and handed me a copy of the Tallahassee *Democrat*.

With a chuckle, he patted me on the head and disappeared into his office. Slowly I unfolded the paper to the story he'd marked. "Wife Gets Even."

I read all about how the cheat-on Terri Wheeler had burst into one C. Z. Mallory's house and caught her with Mr. Wheeler. She'd brandished a baseball bat in one hand and a frying pan in the other. She'd chased them down the street, where they cowered, mostly naked, on a street corner until Terri deemed that enough neighbors had gathered to gawk to give her full revenge for her husband's infidelity.

Thoughtfully, I put the paper down. It seemed all had ended well. But I still put in my notice

and I still quit, even though Mr. Porter told me I showed real promise for a woman. He called me a few months later and told me Terri and Richard had divorced. Richard had married C. Z. Mallory and moved to Houston to sell plumbing fixtures.

I turned down Mr. Porter's generous offer of a pay increase if only I'd return to work. I've changed my major to psychology. I have real hopes of performing a personality makeover on Joe-Warren in case I decide to marry him.

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## SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":

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Ike, the drug pusher, was in the southwest corner store. He and his wife Rosie ostensibly sold clothing.

LOCATION	MAN	WIFE	COLOR	STORE
Northwest	Carl	Olga	green	drapery
North	Hank	Julia	white	paint
Northeast	Fred	Polly	orange	books
West	Bert	Kathy	red	hardware
Central	Elmo	Quilla	gray	bakery
East	Dan	Laura	blue	florist
Southwest	Ike	Rosie	purple	clothing
South	Andy	Nora	yellow	furniture
Southeast	Gus	Maria	brown	grocery

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# FLY PAPER

Dashiell Hammett



**I**t was a wandering daughter job.

The Hambletons had been for several generations a wealthy and decently prominent New York family. There was nothing in the Hambleton history to account for Sue, the youngest member of the clan. She grew out of childhood with a kink that made her dislike the polished side of life, like the rough. By the time she was twenty-one, in 1926, she definitely preferred Tenth Avenue to Fifth, grifters to bankers, and Hymie the Riveter to the Honorable Cecil Windown, who had asked her to marry him.

The Hambletons tried to make Sue behave, but it was too late for that. She was legally of age. When she finally told them to go to hell and walked out on them, there wasn't much they could do about it. Her father, Major Waldo Hambleton, had given up all the hopes he ever had of salvaging her, but he didn't want her to run into any grief that could be avoided. So he came into the Continental Detective Agency's New York office and asked to have an eye kept on her.

Hymie the Riveter was a Philadelphia racketeer who had moved north to the big city, carrying a Thompson submachine gun wrapped in blue-checkered oilcloth, after a disagreement with his partners. New York wasn't so good a field as Philadelphia for machine gun work. The Thompson lay idle for a year or so while Hymie made expenses with an automatic, preying on small-time crap games in Harlem.

Three or four months after Sue went to live with Hymie he made what looked like a promising connection with the first of the crew that came into New York from Chicago to organize the city on the western scale. But the boys from Chi didn't want Hymie; they wanted the Thompson. When he showed it to them, as the big item in his application for employment, they shot holes in the top of Hymie's head and went away with the gun.

Sue Hambleton buried Hymie, had a couple of lonely weeks in which she hocked a ring to eat, and then got a job as hostess in a speakeasy run by a Greek named Vassos.

One of Vassos' customers was Babe McCloor, two hundred and fifty pounds of hard Scotch-Irish-Indian bone and muscle, a black-haired, blue-eyed, swarthy giant who was resting up after doing a fifteen year hitch in Leavenworth for ruining most of the smaller post offices between New Orleans and Omaha. Babe was keeping himself in drinking money while he rested by playing with pedestrians in dark streets.

Babe liked Sue. Vassos liked Sue. Sue liked Babe. Vassos didn't like that. Jealousy spoiled the Greek's judgment. He kept the speakeasy door locked one night when Babe wanted to come in. Babe came in, bringing pieces of the door with him. Vassos got his gun out but couldn't shake Sue off his arm. He stopped trying when Babe hit him with the part of the door that had the brass knob on it. Babe and Sue went away from Vassos' together.

Up to that time the New York office had managed to keep in touch with Sue. She hadn't been kept under constant surveillance. Her father hadn't wanted that. It was simply a matter of sending a man around every week or so to see that she was still alive, to pick up whatever information he could from her friends and neighbors, without, of course, letting her know she was being tabbed. All that had been easy enough, but when she and Babe went away after wrecking the gin mill, they dropped completely out of sight.

After turning the city upside-down, the New York office sent a journal on the job to the other Continental branches throughout the country, giving the information above and enclosing photographs and descriptions of Sue and her new playmate. That was late in 1927.

We had enough copies of the photographs to go around, and for the next month or so whoever had a little idle time on his hands spent it looking through San Francisco and Oakland for the missing pair. We didn't find them. Operatives in other cities, doing the same thing, had the same luck.

Then, nearly a year later, a telegram came to us from the New York office. Decoded, it read:

MAJOR HAMBLETON TODAY RECEIVED TELEGRAM FROM  
DAUGHTER IN SAN FRANCISCO QUOTE PLEASE WIRE ME  
THOUSAND DOLLARS CARE APARTMENT TWO HUNDRED SIX  
NUMBER SIX HUNDRED ONE EDDIS STREET STOP I WILL COME  
HOME IF YOU WILL LET ME STOP PLEASE TELL ME IF I CAN  
COME BUT PLEASE PLEASE WIRE MONEY ANYWAY UNQUOTE  
HAMBLETON AUTHORIZES PAYMENT OF MONEY TO HER IMME-  
DIATELY STOP DETAIL COMPETENT OPERATIVE TO CALL ON  
HER WITH MONEY AND TO ARRANGE FOR HER RETURN HOME  
STOP IF POSSIBLE HAVE MAN AND WOMAN OPERATIVE ACCOM-  
PANY HER HERE STOP HAMBLETON WIRING HER STOP REPORT  
IMMEDIATELY BY WIRE.

The Old Man gave me the telegram and a check, saying, "You

know the situation. You'll know how to handle it."

I pretended I agreed with him, went down to the bank, swapped the check for a bundle of bills of several sizes, caught a streetcar, and went up to 601 Eddis Street, a fairly large apartment building on the corner of Larkin.

The name on Apartment 206's vestibule mailbox was J. M. Wales.

I pushed 206's button. When the locked door buzzed off, I went into the building, past the elevator to the stairs, and up a flight. Two-oh-six was just around the corner from the stairs.

The apartment door was opened by a tall, slim man of thirty-something in neat dark clothes. He had narrow dark eyes set in a long, pale face. There was some gray in the dark hair brushed flat to his scalp.

"Miss Hambleton," I said.

"Uh—what about her?" His voice was smooth, but not too smooth to be agreeable.

"I'd like to see her."

His upper eyelids came down a little and the brows over them came a little closer together. He asked, "Is it—?" and stopped, watching me steadily.

I didn't say anything. Presently he finished his question, "Something to do with a telegram?"

"Yeah."

His long face brightened immediately. He asked, "You're from her father?"

"Yeah."

He stepped back and swung the door wide open, saying, "Come in. Major Hambleton's wire came to her only a few minutes ago. He said someone would call."

We went through a small passageway into a sunny living room that was cheaply furnished but neat and clean enough.

"Sit down," the man said, pointing at a brown rocking chair.

I sat down. He sat on the burlap-covered sofa facing me. I looked around the room. I didn't see anything to show that a woman was living there.

He rubbed the long bridge of his nose with a longer forefinger and asked slowly, "You brought the money?"

I said I'd feel more like talking with her there.



He looked at the finger with which he had been rubbing his nose, and then up at me, saying softly, "But I'm her friend."

I said, "Yeah?" to that.

"Yes," he repeated. He frowned slightly, drawing back the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. "I've only asked whether you've brought the money."

I didn't say anything.

"The point is," he said quite reasonably, "that if you brought the money she doesn't expect you to hand it over to anybody except her. If you didn't bring it, she doesn't want to see you: I don't think her mind can be changed about that. That's why I asked if you had brought it."

He looked doubtfully at me. I showed him the money I had got from the bank. He jumped up briskly from the sofa.

"I'll have her here in a minute or two," he said over his shoulder as his long legs moved him toward the door. At the door he stopped to ask, "Do you know her? Or shall I have her bring means of identifying herself?"

"That would be best," I told him.

He went out, leaving the corridor door open.

In five minutes he was back with a slender blonde girl of twenty-three in pale green silk. The looseness of her small mouth and the puffiness around her blue eyes weren't yet pronounced enough to spoil her prettiness.

I stood up.

"This is Miss Hambleton," he said.

She gave me a swift glance and then lowered her eyes again, nervously playing with the strap of a handbag she held.

"You can identify yourself?" I asked.

"Sure," the man said. "Show them to him, Sue."

She opened the bag, brought out some papers and things, and held them up for me to take.

"Sit down, sit down," the man said as I took them.

They sat on the sofa. I sat in the rocking chair again and examined the things she had given me. There were two letters addressed to Sue Hambleton here, her father's telegram welcoming her home, a couple of receipted department store bills, an automobile driver's license, and a savings account passbook that showed a balance of less than ten dollars.

By the time I had finished my examination the girl's embarrass-

ment was gone. She looked levelly at me, as did the man beside her. I felt in my pocket, found my copy of the photograph New York had sent us at the beginning of the hunt, and looked from it to her.

"Your mouth could have shrunk, maybe," I said, "but how could your nose have got that much longer?"

"If you don't like my nose," she said, "how'd you like to go to hell?" Her face had turned red.

"That's not the point. It's a swell nose, but it's not Sue's." I held the photograph out to her. "See for yourself."

She glared at the photograph and then at the man.

"What a smart guy you are," she told him.

He was watching me with dark eyes that had a brittle shine to them between narrow-drawn eyelids. He kept on watching me while he spoke to her out the side of his mouth, crisply. "Pipe down."

She piped down. He sat and watched me. I sat and watched him. A clock ticked seconds away behind me. His eyes began shifting their focus from one of my eyes to the other. The girl sighed.

He said in a low voice, "Well?"

I said, "You're in a hole."

"What can you make out of it?" he asked casually.

"Conspiracy to defraud."

The girl jumped up and hit one of his shoulders angrily with the back of a hand, crying, "What a smart guy you are, to get me in a jam like this. It was going to be duck soup—yeh! Eggs in the coffee—yeh! Now look at you. You haven't even got guts enough to tell this guy to go chase himself." She spun around to face me, pushing her red face down at me—I was still sitting in the rocker—snarling, "Well, what are you waiting for? Waiting to be kissed goodbye? We don't owe you anything, do we? We didn't get any of your lousy money, did we? Outside, then. Take the air. Dangle."

"Stop it, sister," I growled. "You'll bust something."

The man said, "For God's sake stop that bawling, Peggy, and give somebody else a chance." He addressed me, "Well, what do you want?"

"How'd you get into this?" I asked.

He spoke quickly, eagerly. "A fellow named Kenny gave me that stuff and told me about this Sue Hambleton, and her old man having plenty. I thought I'd give it a whirl. I figured the old man would either wire the dough right off the reel or wouldn't send it at all. I

didn't figure on this send-a-man stuff. Then when his wire came, saying he was sending a man to see her, I ought to have dropped it.

"But hell! Here was a man coming with a grand in cash. That was too good to let go of without a try. It looked like there still might be a chance of copping, so I got Peggy to do Sue for me. If the man was coming today, it was a cinch he belonged out here on the Coast, and it was an even bet he wouldn't know Sue, would only have a description of her. From what Kenny had told me about her, I knew Peggy would come pretty close to fitting her description. I still don't see how you got that photograph. I only wired the old man yesterday. I mailed a couple of letters to Sue, here, yesterday, so we'd have them with the other identification stuff to get the money from the telegraph company on."

"Kenny gave you the old man's address?"

"Sure he did."

"Did he give you Sue's?"

"No."

"How'd Kenny get hold of the stuff?"

"He didn't say."

"Where's Kenny now?"

"I don't know. He was on his way east, with something else on the fire, and couldn't fool with this. That's why he passed it on to me."

"Big-hearted Kenny," I said. "You know Sue Hambleton?"

"No," emphatically. "I'd never even heard of her till Kenny told me."

"I don't like this Kenny," I said, "though without him your story's got some good points. Could you tell it leaving him out?"

He shook his head slowly from side to side, saying, "It wouldn't be the way it happened."

"That's too bad. Conspiracies to defraud don't mean as much to me as finding Sue. I might have made a deal with you."

He shook his head again, but his eyes were thoughtful, and his lower lip moved up to overlap the upper a little.

The girl had stepped back so she could see both of us as we talked, turning her face, which showed she didn't like us, from one to the other as we spoke our pieces. Now she fastened her gaze on the man, and her eyes were growing angry again.

I got up on my feet, telling him, "Suit yourself. But if you want to play it that way, I'll have to take you both in."

He smiled with indrawn lips and stood up.

The girl thrust herself in between us, facing him.

"This is a swell time to be dummying up," she spit at him. "Pop off, you lightweight, or I will. You're crazy if you think I'm going to take the fall with you."

"Shut up," he said in his throat.

"Shut me up," she cried.

He tried to, with both hands. I reached over her shoulders and caught one of his wrists, knocked the other hand up.

She slid out from between us and ran around behind me, screaming, "Joe does know her. He got the things from her. She's at the St. Martin on O'Farrell Street—her and Babe McCloor."

While I listened to this I had to pull my head aside to let Joe's right hook miss me, had got his left arm twisted behind him, had turned my hip to catch his knee, and had got the palm of my left hand under his chin. I was ready to give his chin the Japanese tilt when he stopped wrestling and grunted, "Let me tell it."

"Hop to it," I consented, taking my hands away from him and stepping back.

He rubbed the wrist I had wrenched, scowling past me at the girl. He called her four unlovely names; the mildest of which was "a dumb twist," and told her, "He was bluffing about throwing us in the can. You don't think old man Hambleton's hunting for newspaper space, do you?" That wasn't a bad guess.

He sat on the sofa again, still rubbing his wrist. The girl stayed on the other side of the room, laughing at him through her teeth.

I said, "All right, roll it out, one of you."

"You've got it all," he muttered. "I glaumed that stuff last week when I was visiting Babe, knowing the story and hating to see a promising layout like that go to waste."

"What's Babe doing now?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Is he still puffing them?"

"I don't know."

"Like hell you don't."

"I don't," he insisted. "If you know Babe, you know you can't get anything out of him about what he's doing."

"How long have he and Sue been here?"

"About six months that I know of."

"Who's he mobbed up with?"

"I don't know. Any time Babe works with a mob he picks them up on the road and leaves them on the road."

"How's he fixed?"

"I don't know. There's always enough grub and liquor in the joint."

Half an hour of this convinced me that I wasn't going to get much information about my people here.

I went to the phone in the passageway and called the agency. The boy on the switchboard told me MacMan was in the operatives' room. I asked to have him sent up to me, and went back to the living room. Joe and Peggy took their heads apart when I came in.

MacMan arrived in less than ten minutes. I let him in and told him, "This fellow says his name's Joe Wales, and the girl's supposed to be Peggy Carroll, who lives upstairs in 421. We've got them cold for conspiracy to defraud, but I've made a deal with them. I'm going out to look at it now. Stay here with them, in this room. Nobody goes in or out, and nobody but you gets to the phone. There's a fire escape in front of the window. The window's locked now. I'd keep it that way. If the deal turns out okay, we'll let them go, but if they cut up on you while I'm gone, there's no reason why you can't knock them around as much as you want."

MacMan nodded his hard round head and pulled a chair out between them and the door. I picked up my hat.

Joe Wales called, "Hey, you're not going to uncover me to Babe, are you? That's got to be part of the deal."

"Not unless I have to."

"I'd just as leave stand the rap," he said. "I'd be safer in jail."

"I'll give you the best break I can," I promised, "but you'll have to take what's dealt you."

Walking over to the St. Martin—only half a dozen blocks from Wales's place—I decided to go up against McCloor and the girl as a Continental op who suspected Babe of being in on a branch bank stickup in Alameda the previous week. He hadn't been in on it—if the bank people had described half correctly the men who had robbed them—so it wasn't likely my supposed suspicions would frighten him much. Clearing himself, he might give me some information I could use. The chief thing I wanted, of course, was a look at the girl so I could report to her father that I had seen her. There was no reason for supposing that she and Babe knew her father was trying to keep an eye on her. Babe had a record. It was natural enough for sleuths to drop in now and then and try to hang something on him.

The St. Martin was a small three story apartment house of red

brick between two taller hotels. The vestibule register showed R. K. McCloor, 313, as Wales and Peggy had told me.

I pushed the bell button. Nothing happened. Nothing happened any of the four times I pushed it. I pushed the button labeled Manager.

The door clicked open. I went indoors. A beefy woman in a pink-striped cotton dress that needed pressing stood in an apartment doorway just inside the street door.

"Some people named McCloor live here?" I asked.

"Three-thirteen," she said.

"Been living here long?"

She pursed her fat mouth, looked intently at me, hesitated, but finally said, "Since last June."

"What do you know about them?"

She balked at that, raising her chin and her eyebrows.

I gave her my card. That was safe enough; it fit in with the pretext I intended using upstairs.

Her face, when she raised it from reading the card, was oily with curiosity.

"Come in here," she said in a husky whisper, backing through the doorway.

I followed her into her apartment. We sat on a chesterfield and she whispered, "What is it?"

"Maybe nothing." I kept my voice low, playing up to her theatricals. "He's done time for safe-burglary. I'm trying to get a line on him now, on the off chance that he might have been tied up in a recent job. I don't know that he was. He may be going straight for all I know." I took his photograph—front and profile, taken at Leavenworth—out of my pocket. "This him?"

She seized it eagerly, nodded, said, "Yes, that's him, all right," turned it over to read the description on the back, and repeated, "Yes, that's him, all right."

"His wife is here with him?" I asked.

She nodded vigorously.

"I don't know her," I said. "What sort of looking girl is she?"

She described a girl who could have been Sue Hambleton. I couldn't show Sue's picture; that would have uncovered me if she and Babe heard about it.

I asked the woman what she knew about the McCloors. What she knew wasn't a great deal: paid their rent on time, kept irregular hours, had occasional drinking parties, quarreled a lot.

"Think they're in now?" I asked. "I got no answer on the bell."

"I don't know," she whispered. "I haven't seen either of them since night before last, when they had a fight."

"Much of a fight?"

"Not much worse than usual."

"Could you find out if they're in?" I asked.

She looked at me out of the ends of her eyes.

"I'm not going to make any trouble for you," I assured her. "But if they've blown, I'd like to know it, and I reckon you would, too."

"All right, I'll find out." She got up, patting a pocket in which keys jingled. "You wait here."

"I'll go as far as the third floor with you," I said, "and wait out of sight there."

"All right," she said reluctantly.

On the third floor, I remained by the elevator. She disappeared around a corner of the dim corridor, and presently a muffled electric bell rang. It rang three times. I heard her keys jingle and one of them grate in a lock. The lock clicked. I heard the doorknob rattle as she turned it.

Then a long moment of silence was ended by a scream that filled the corridor from wall to wall.

I jumped for the corner, swung around it, saw an open door ahead, went through it, and slammed the door shut behind me.

The scream stopped.

I was in a small dark vestibule with three doors beside the one I had come through. One door was shut. One opened into a bathroom. I went to the other.

The fat manager stood just inside it, her round back to me. I pushed past her and saw what she was looking at.

Sue Hambleton, in pale yellow pajamas trimmed with black lace, was lying across the bed. She lay on her back. Her arms were stretched out over her head. One leg was bent under her, one stretched out so that its bare foot rested on the floor. That bare foot was whiter than a live foot could be. Her face was white as her foot, except for a mottled, swollen area from the right eyebrow to the right cheekbone and dark bruises on her throat.

"Phone the police," I told the woman, and began poking into corners, closets, and drawers.

It was late afternoon when I returned to the agency. I asked the file clerk to see if we had anything on Joe Wales and Peggy Carroll, and then went into the Old Man's office.



He put down some reports he had been reading, gave me a nodded invitation to sit down, and asked, "You've seen her?"

"Yeah. She's dead."

The Old Man said, "Indeed," as if I had said it was raining, and smiled with polite attentiveness while I told him about it—from the time I had rung Wales's bell until I had joined the fat manager in the dead girl's apartment.

"She had been knocked around some, was bruised on the face and neck," I wound up. "But that didn't kill her."

"You think she was murdered?" he asked, still smiling gently.

"I don't know. Doc Jordan says he thinks it could have been arsenic. He's hunting for it in her now. We found a funny thing in the joint. Some thick sheets of dark gray paper were stuck in a book—*The Count of Monte Cristo*—wrapped in a month-old newspaper and wedged into a dark corner between the stove and the kitchen wall."

"Ah, arsenical fly paper," the Old Man murmured. "The Maybrick-Seddons trick. Mashed in water, four to six grains of arsenic can be soaked out of a sheet—enough to kill two people."

I nodded, saying, "I worked on one in Louisville in 1916. The mulatto janitor saw McCloor leaving at half past nine yesterday morning. She was probably dead before that. Nobody's seen him since. Earlier in the morning the people in the next apartment had heard them talking, her groaning. But they had too many fights for the neighbors to pay much attention to that. The landlady told me they had a fight the night before that. The police are hunting for him."

"Did you tell the police who she was?"

"No. What do we do on that angle? We can't tell them about Wales without telling them all."

"I dare say the whole thing will have to come out," he said thoughtfully. "I'll wire New York."

I went out of his office. The file clerk gave me a couple of newspaper clippings. The first told me that fifteen months ago Joseph Wales, alias Holy Joe, had been arrested on the complaint of a farmer named Toomey that he had been taken for twenty-five hundred dollars on a phony "business opportunity" by Wales and three other men. The second clipping said the case had been dropped when Toomey failed to appear against Wales in court—bought off in the customary manner by the return of part or all of his money. That was all our files held on Wales, and they had nothing on Peggy Carroll.

\*

MacMan opened the door for me when I returned to Wales's apartment.

"Anything doing?" I asked him.

"Nothing—except they've been belly-aching a lot."

Wales came forward, asking eagerly, "Satisfied now?"

The girl stood by the window, looking at me with anxious eyes.

I didn't say anything.

"Did you find her?" Wales asked, frowning. "She was where I told you?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Well then." Part of his frown went away. "That lets Peggy and me out, doesn't—" He broke off, ran his tongue over his lower lip, put a hand to his chin, asked sharply, "You didn't give them the tipoff on me, did you?"

I shook my head, no.

He took his hand from his chin and asked irritably, "What's the matter with you, then? What are you looking like that for?"

Behind him the girl spoke bitterly. "I knew damned well it would be like this," she said. "I knew damned well we weren't going to get out of it. Oh, what a smart guy you are!"

"Take Peggy into the kitchen, and shut both doors," I told MacMan. "Holy Joe and I are going to have a real heart-to-heart talk."

The girl went out willingly, but when MacMan was closing the door she put her head in again to tell Wales, "I hope he busts you in the nose if you try to hold out on him."

MacMan shut the door.

"Your playmate seems to think you know something," I said.

Wales scowled at the door and grumbled, "She's more help to me than a broken leg." He turned his face to me, trying to make it look frank and friendly. "What do you want? I came clean with you before. What's the matter now?"

"What do you guess?"

He pulled his lips in between his teeth. "What do you want to make me guess for?" he demanded. "I'm willing to play ball with you. But what can I do if you won't tell me what you want? I can't see inside your head."

"You'd get a kick out of it if you could."

He shook his head wearily and walked back to the sofa, sitting down bent forward, his hands together between his knees. "All

right," he sighed. "Take your time about asking me. I'll wait for you."

I went over and stood in front of him. I took his chin between my left thumb and fingers, raising his head and bending my own down until our noses were almost touching. I said, "Where you stumbled, Joe, was in sending the telegram right after the murder."

"He's dead?" It popped out before his eyes had even had time to grow round and wide.

The question threw me off balance. I had to wrestle with my forehead to keep it from wrinkling, and I put too much calmness in my voice when I asked, "Is who dead?"

"Who? How do I know? Who do you mean?"

"Who did you think I meant?" I insisted.

"How do I know? Oh, all right! Old man Hambleton, Sue's father."

"That's right," I said, and took my hand away from his chin.

"And he was murdered, you say?" He hadn't moved his face an inch from the position into which I had lifted it. "How?"

"Arsenic fly paper."

"Arsenic fly paper." He looked thoughtful. "That's a funny one."

"Yeah, very funny. Where'd you go about buying some if you wanted it?"

"Buying it? I don't know. I haven't seen any since I was a kid. Nobody uses fly paper here in San Francisco anyway. There aren't enough flies."

"Somebody used some here," I said, "on Sue."

"Sue?" He jumped so that the sofa squeaked under him.

"Yeah. Murdered yesterday morning—arsenical fly paper."

"Both of them?" he asked incredulously.

"Both of who?"

"Her and her father."

"Yeah."

He put his chin far down on his chest and rubbed the back of one hand with the palm of the other. "Then I am in a hole," he said slowly.

"That's what," I cheerfully agreed. "Want to try talking yourself out of it?"

"Let me think."

I let him think, listening to the tick of the clock while he thought. Thinking brought drops of sweat out on his gray-white face. Presently he sat up straight, wiping his face with a fancily colored

handkerchief. "I'll talk," he said. "I've got to talk now. Sue was getting ready to ditch Babe. She and I were going away. She—here, I'll show you."

He put his hand in his pocket and held out a folded sheet of thick notepaper to me. I took it and read:

*Dear Joe:—*

*I can't stand this much longer—we've simply got to go soon. Babe beat me again tonight. Please, if you really love me, let's make it soon.*

*Sue*

The handwriting was a nervous woman's, tall, angular, and piled up. "That's why I made the play for Hambleton's grand," he said. "I've been shatting on my uppers for a couple of months, and when that letter came yesterday, I just had to raise dough somehow to get her away. She wouldn't have stood for tapping her father, though, so I tried to swing it without her knowing."

"When did you see her last?"

"Day before yesterday, the day she mailed that letter. Only I saw her in the afternoon—she was here—and she wrote it that night."

"Babe suspect what you were up to?"

"We didn't think he did. I don't know. He was jealous as hell all the time, whether he had any reason to be or not."

"How much reason did he have?"

Wales looked me straight in the eye and said, "Sue was a good kid."

I said, "Well, she's been murdered."

He didn't say anything.

Day was darkening into evening. I went to the door and pressed the light button. I didn't lose sight of Holy Joe Wales while I was doing it.

As I took my finger away from the button, something clicked at the window. The click was loud and sharp.

I looked at the window.

A man crouched there on the fire escape, looking in through the glass and lace curtain. He was a thick-featured dark man whose size identified him as Babe McCloor. The muzzle of a big black automatic was touching the glass in front of him. He had tapped the glass with it to catch our attention.

He had our attention.

There wasn't anything for me to do just then. I stood there and looked at him. I couldn't tell whether he was looking at me or at Wales. I could see him clearly enough, but the lace curtain spoiled my view of details like that. I imagined he wasn't neglecting either of us, and I didn't imagine the lace curtain hid much from him. He was closer to the curtain than we, and I had turned on the room's lights.

Wales, sitting dead still on the sofa, was looking at McCloor. Wales's face wore a peculiar, stiffly sullen expression. His eyes were sullen. He wasn't breathing.

McCloor flicked the nose of his pistol against the pane, and a triangular piece of glass fell out, tinkling apart on the floor. It didn't, I was afraid, make enough noise to alarm MacMan in the kitchen. There were two closed doors between here and there.

Wales looked at the broken pane and closed his eyes. He closed them slowly, little by little, exactly as if he were falling asleep. He kept his stiffly sullen blank face turned straight to the window.

McCloor shot him three times.

The bullets knocked Wales down on the sofa back against the wall. Wales's eyes popped open, bulging. His lips crawled back over his teeth, leaving them naked to the gums. His tongue came out. Then his head fell down and he didn't move any more.

When McCloor jumped away from the window, I jumped to it. While I was pushing the curtain aside, unlocking the window and raising it, I heard his feet land on the cement paving below.

MacMan flung the door open and came in, the girl at his heels.

"Take care of this," I ordered as I scrambled over the sill. "McCloor shot him."

Wales's apartment was on the second floor. The fire escape ended there with a counterweighted iron ladder that a man's weight would swing down into a cement-paved court.

I went down as Babe McCloor had gone, swinging down on the ladder till within dropping distance of the court and then letting go.

There was only one street exit to the court. I took it.

A startled-looking, smallish man was standing in the middle of the sidewalk close to the court, gaping at me as I dashed out.

I caught his arm, shook it. "A big guy running." Maybe I yelled. "Where?"

He tried to say something, couldn't, and waved his arm at billboards standing across the front of a vacant lot on the other side of the street.

I forgot to say, "Thank you," in my hurry to get over there.

I got behind the billboards by crawling under them instead of going to either end, where there were openings. The lot was large enough and weedy enough to give cover to anybody who wanted to lie down and bushwhack a pursuer—even anybody as large as Babe McCloor.

While I considered that, I heard a dog barking at one corner of the lot. He could have been barking at a man who had run by. I ran to that corner of the lot. The dog was in a board-fenced back yard, at the corner of a narrow alley that ran from the lot to a street.

I chinned myself on the board fence, saw a wire-haired terrier alone in the yard, and ran down the alley while he was charging my part of the fence.

I put my gun back in my pocket before I left the alley for the street.

A small touring car was parked at the curb in front of a cigar store some fifteen feet from the alley. A policeman was talking to a slim, dark-faced man in the cigar store doorway.

"The big fellow that come out of the alley a minute ago," I said. "Which way did he go?"

The policeman looked dumb. The slim man nodded his head down the street, said, "Down that way," and went on with his conversation.

I said, "Thanks," and went on down the corner. There was a taxi phone there and two idle taxis. A block and a half below, a streetcar was going away. "Did the big fellow who came down here a minute ago take a taxi or the streetcar?" I asked the two taxi chauffeurs who were leaning against one of the taxis.

The rattier-looking one said, "He didn't take a taxi."

I said, "I'll take one. Catch that streetcar for me."

The streetcar was three blocks away before we got going. The street wasn't clear enough for me to see who got on and off it. We caught it when it stopped at Market Street.

"Follow along," I told the driver as I jumped out.

On the rear platform of the streetcar I looked through the glass. There were only eight or ten people aboard.

"There was a great big fellow got on at Hyde Street," I said to the conductor. "Where'd he get off?"

The conductor looked at the silver dollar I was turning over in my fingers and remembered that the big man got off at Taylor Street. That won the silver dollar.

I dropped off as the streetcar turned into Market Street. The taxi, close behind, slowed down, and its door swung open. "Sixth and Mission," I said as I hopped in.

McCloor could have gone in any direction from Taylor Street. I had to guess. The best guess seemed to be that he would make for the other side of Market Street.

It was fairly dark by now. We had to go down to Fifth Street to get off Market, then over to Mission, and back up to Sixth. We got to Sixth Street without seeing McCloor. I couldn't see him on Sixth Street—either way from the crossing.

"On up to Ninth," I ordered, and while we rode told the driver what kind of man I was looking for.

We arrived at Ninth Street. No McCloor. I cursed and pushed my brains around.

The big man was a yegg. San Francisco was on fire for him. The yegg instinct would be to use a rattler to get away from trouble. The freight yards were in this end of town. Maybe he would be shift enough to lie low instead of trying to powder. In that case, he probably hadn't crossed Market Street at all. If he stuck, there would still be a chance of picking him up tomorrow. If he was hightailing, it was catch him now or not at all.

"Down to Harrison," I told the driver.

We went down to Harrison Street, and down Harrison to Third, up Bryant to Eighth, down Brannan to Third again, and over to Townsend—and we didn't see Babe McCloor.

"That's tough, that is," the driver sympathized as we stopped across the street from the Southern Pacific passenger station.

"I'm going over and look around in the station," I said. "Keep your eyes open while I'm gone."

When I told the copper in the station my trouble, he introduced me to a couple of plainclothes men who had been planted there to watch for McCloor. That had been done after Sue Hambleton's body was found. The shooting of Holy Joe Wales was news to them.

I went outside again and found my taxi in front of the door, its horn working overtime, but too asthmatically to be heard indoors. The ratty driver was excited.

"A guy like you said come up out of King Street just now and swung on a Number 16 car as it pulled away," he said.

"Going which way?"

"Thataway," pointing southeast.

"Catch him," I said, jumping in.



The streetcar was out of sight around a bend in Third Street two blocks below. When we rounded the bend, the streetcar was slowing up, four blocks ahead. It hadn't slowed up very much when a man leaned far out and stepped off. He was a tall man but didn't look tall on account of his shoulder spread. He didn't check his momentum but used it to carry him across the sidewalk and out of sight.

We stopped where the man had left the car.

I gave the driver too much money and told him, "Go back to Townsend Street and tell the copper in the station that I've chased Babe McCloor into the S.P. yards."

I thought I was moving silently down between two strings of box-cars, but I had gone less than twenty feet when a light flashed in my face and a sharp voice ordered, "Stand still, you."

I stood still. Men came from between cars. One of them spoke my name, adding, "What are you doing here? Lost?" It was Harry Pebble, a police detective.

I stopped holding my breath and said, "Hello, Harry. Looking for Babe?"

"Yes. We've been going over the rattlers."

"He's here. I just tailed him in from the street."

Pebble swore and snapped the light off.

"Watch, Harry," I advised. "Don't play with him. He's packing plenty of gun and he's cut down one boy tonight."

"I'll play with him," Pebble promised, and told one of the men with him to go over and warn those on the other side of the yard that McCloor was in, and then to ring for reinforcements.

"We'll just sit on the edge and hold him in till they come," he said.

That seemed a sensible way to play it. We spread out and waited. Once Pebble and I turned back a lanky bum who tried to slip into the yard between us, and one of the men below us picked up a shivering kid who was trying to slip out. Otherwise nothing happened until Lieutenant Duff arrived with a couple of carloads of coppers.

Most of our force went into a cordon around the yard. The rest of us went through the yard in small groups, working it over car by car. We picked up a few hoboos that Pebble and his men had missed earlier, but we didn't find McCloor.

We didn't find any trace of him until somebody stumbled over a railroad bum huddled in the shadow of a gondola. It took a couple of minutes to bring him to, and he couldn't talk then. His jaw was bro-

ken. But when we asked if McCloor had slugged him; he nodded, and when we asked in which direction McCloor had been headed, he moved a feeble hand to the east.

We went over and searched the Santa Fe yards.

We didn't find McCloor.

I rode up to the Hall of Justice with Duff. MacMan was in the captain of detectives' office with three or four police sleuths.

"Wales die?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Say anything before he went?"

"He was gone before you were through the window."

"You held on to the girl?"

"She's here."

"She say anything?"

"We were waiting for you before we tapped her," detective-sergeant O'Gar said, "not knowing the angle on her."

"Let's have her in. I haven't had any dinner yet. How about the autopsy on Sue Hambleton?"

"Chronic arsenic poisoning."

"Chronic? That means it was fed to her little by little, and not in a lump?"

"Uh-huh. From what he found in her kidneys, intestines, liver, stomach, and blood, Jordan figures there was less than a grain of it in her. That wouldn't be enough to knock her off. But he says he found arsenic in the tips of her hair, and she'd have to be given some at least a month ago for it to have worked out that far."

"Any chance that it wasn't arsenic that killed her?"

"Not unless Jordan's a bum doctor."

A policewoman came in with Peggy Carroll.

The blonde girl was tired. Her eyelids, mouth corners, and body drooped, and when I pushed a chair out toward her, she sagged down in it.

O'Gar ducked his grizzled bullet head at me.

"Now, Peggy," I said, "tell us where you fit into this mess."

"I don't fit into it." She didn't look up. Her voice was tired. "Joe dragged me into it. He told you."

"You his girl?"

"If you want to call it that," she admitted.

"You jealous?"

"What," she asked, looking up at me, her face puzzled, "has that got to do with it?"

"Sue Hambleton was getting ready to go away with him when she was murdered."

The girl sat up straight in the chair and said deliberately, "I swear to God I didn't know she was murdered."

"But you did know she was dead," I said positively.

"I didn't," she replied just as positively.

I nudged O'Gar with my elbow. He pushed his undershot jaw at her and barked, "What are you trying to give us? You knew she was dead. How could you kill her without knowing it?"

While she looked at him I waved the others in. They crowded close around her and took up the chorus of the sergeant's song. She was barked, roared, and snarled at plenty in the next few minutes.

The instant she stopped trying to talk back to them I cut in again. "Wait," I said, very earnestly. "Maybe she didn't kill her."

"The hell she didn't," O'Gar stormed, holding the center of the stage so the others could move away from the girl without their retreat seeming too artificial. "Do you mean to tell me this baby—"

"I didn't say she didn't," I remonstrated. "I said maybe she didn't."

"Then who did?"

I passed the question to the girl. "Who did?"

"Babe," she said immediately.

O'Gar snorted to make her think he didn't believe her.

I asked, as if I were honestly perplexed, "How do you know that if you didn't know she was dead?"

"It stands to reason he did," she said. "Anybody can see that. He found out she was going away with Joe, so he killed her and then came to Joe's and killed him. That's just exactly what Babe would do when he found it out."

"Yeah? How long have you known they were going away together?"

"Since they decided to. Joe told me a month or two ago."

"And you didn't mind?"

"You've got this all wrong," she said. "Of course I didn't mind. I was being cut in on it. You know her father had the bees. That's what Joe was after. She didn't mean anything to him but an in to the old man's pockets. And I was to get my dib. And you needn't think I was crazy enough about Joe or anybody else to step off in

the air for them. Babe got next and fixed the pair of them. That's a cinch."

"Yeah? How do you figure Babe would kill her?"

"That guy? You don't think he'd—"

"I mean how would he go about killing her?"

"Oh!" She shrugged. "With his hands, likely as not."

"Once he'd made up his mind to do it, he'd do it quick and violent?" I suggested.

"That would be Babe," she agreed.

"But you can't see him slow-poisoning her—spreading it out over a month?"

Worry came into the girl's blue eyes. She put her lower lip between her teeth, then said slowly, "No, I can't see him doing it that way. Not Babe."

"Who can you see doing it that way?"

She opened her eyes wide, asking, "You mean Joe?"

I didn't say anything.

"Joe might have," she said persuasively. "God only knows what he'd want to do it for, why he'd want to get rid of the kind of meal ticket she was going to be. But you couldn't always guess what he was getting at. He pulled plenty of dumb ones. He was too slick without being smart. If he was going to kill her, though, that would be about the way he'd go about it."

"Were he and Babe friendly?"

"No."

"Did he go to Babe's much?"

"Not at all that I know about. He was too leery of Babe to take a chance on being caught there. That's why I moved upstairs, so Sue could come over to our place to see him."

"Then how could Joe have hidden the fly paper he poisoned her with in her apartment?"

"Fly paper!" Her bewilderment seemed honest enough.

"Show it to her," I told O'Gar.

He got a sheet from the desk and held it close to the girl's face.

She stared at it for a moment and then jumped up and grabbed my arm with both hands.

"I didn't know what it was," she said excitedly. "Joe had some a couple of months ago. He was looking at it when I came in. I asked him what it was for, and he smiled that wisenheimer smile of his and said, 'You make angles out of it,' and wrapped it up again and put it in his pocket. I didn't pay much attention to him; he was al-

ways fooling with some kind of tricks that were supposed to make him wealthy but never did."

"Ever see it again?"

"No."

"Did you know Sue very well?"

"I didn't know her at all. I never even saw her. I used to keep out of the way so I wouldn't gum Joe's play with her."

"But you know Babe?"

"Yes, I've been on a couple of parties where he was. That's all I know him."

"Who killed Sue?"

"Joe," she said. "Didn't he have that paper you say she was killed with?"

"Why did he kill her?"

"I don't know. He pulled some awful dumb tricks sometimes."

"You didn't kill her?"

"No, no, no!"

I jerked the corner of my mouth at O'Gar.

"You're a liar," he bawled, shaking the fly paper in her face. "You killed her." The rest of the team closed in, throwing accusations at her. They kept it up until she was groggy and the policewoman beginning to look worried.

Then I said angrily, "All right. Throw her in a cell and let her think it over." To her, "You know what you told Joe this afternoon: this is no time to dummy up. Do a lot of thinking tonight."

"Honest to God I didn't kill her," she said.

I turned my back to her. The policewoman took her away.

"Ho-hum," O'Gar yawned. "We gave her a pretty good ride at that, for a short one."

"Not bad," I agreed. "If anybody else looked likely, I'd say she didn't kill Sue. But if she's telling the truth, then Holy Joe did it. And why should he poison the goose that was going to lay nice yellow eggs for him? And how and why did he cache the poison in their apartment? Babe had the motive, but damned if he looks like a slow-poisoner to me. You can't tell, though; he and Holy Joe could even have been working together on it."

"Could," Duff said. "But it takes a lot of imagination to get that one down. Any way you twist it, Peggy's our best bet so far. Go up against her again, hard, in the morning?"

"Yeah," I said. "And we've got to find Babe."

The others had had dinner. MacMan and I went out and got ours.

When we returned to the detective bureau an hour later, it was practically deserted of the regular operatives.

"All gone to Pier 42 on a tip that McCloor's there," Steve Ward told us.

"How long ago?"

"Ten minutes."

MacMan and I got a taxi and set out for Pier 42. We didn't get to Pier 42.

On First Street, half a block from the Embarcadero, the taxi suddenly shrieked and slid to a halt.

"What—?" I began, and saw a man standing in front of the machine. He was a big man with a big gun. "Babe," I grunted, and put my hand on MacMan's arm to keep him from getting his gun out.

"Take me to—" McCloor was saying to the frightened driver when he saw us. He came around to my side and pulled the door open, holding the gun on us.

He had no hat. His hair was wet, plastered to his head. Little streams of water trickled down from it. His clothes were dripping wet.

He looked surprised at us and ordered, "Get out."

As we got out he growled at the driver, "What the hell you got your flag up for if you had fares?"

The driver wasn't there. He had hopped out the other side and was scooting away down the street. McCloor cursed him and poked his gun at me, growling, "Go on, beat it."

Apparently he hadn't recognized me. The light here wasn't good, and I had a hat on now. He had seen me for only a few seconds in Wales's room.

I stepped aside. MacMan moved to the other side.

McCloor took a backward step to keep us from getting him between us and started an angry word.

MacMan threw himself on McCloor's gun arm.

I socked McCloor's jaw with my fist. I might just as well have hit somebody else for all it seemed to bother him.

He swept me out of his way and pasted MacMan in the mouth. MacMan fell back till the taxi stopped him, spit out a tooth, and came back for more.

I was trying to climb up McCloor's left side.

MacMan came in on his right, failed to dodge a chop of the gun, caught it square on the top of the noodle, and went down hard. He stayed down.

I kicked McCloor's ankle but couldn't get his foot from under him. I rammed my right fist into the small of his back and got a left-handful of his wet hair, swinging on it. He shook his head, dragging me off my feet.

He punched me in the side, and I could feel my ribs and guts flattening together like leaves in a book.

I swung my fist against the back of his neck. That bothered him. He made a rumbling noise down in his chest, crunched my shoulder in his left hand, and chopped at me with the gun in his right.

I kicked him somewhere and punched his neck again.

Down the street, at the Embarcadero, a police whistle was blowing. Men were running up First Street toward us.

McCloor snorted like a locomotive and threw me away from him. I didn't want to go. I tried to hang on. He threw me away from him and ran up the street.

I scrambled up and ran after him, dragging my gun out.

At the first corner he stopped to squirt metal at me—three shots. I squirted one at him. None of the four connected.

He disappeared around the corner. I swung wide around it, to make him miss if he were flattened to the wall waiting for me. He wasn't. He was a hundred feet ahead, going into a space between two warehouses. I went in after him, and out after him at the other end, making better time with my hundred and ninety pounds than he was making with his two fifty.

He crossed a street, turning up, away from the waterfront. There was a light on the corner. When I came into its glare, he wheeled and leveled his gun at me. I didn't hear it click, but I knew it had when he threw it at me. The gun went past with a couple of feet to spare and raised hell against a door behind me.

McCloor turned and ran up the street. I ran up the street after him.

I put a bullet past him to let the others know where we were. At the next corner he started to turn to the left, changed his mind, and went straight on.

I sprinted, cutting the distance between us to forty or fifty feet, and yelled, "Stop or I'll drop you."

He jumped sidewise into a narrow alley.

I passed it on the jump, saw he wasn't waiting for me, and went in. Enough light came in from the street to let us see each other and our surroundings. The alley was blind—walled on each side and at



the other end by tall concrete buildings with steel-shuttered windows and doors.

McCloor faced me, less than twenty feet away. His jaw stuck out. His arms curved down free of his sides. His shoulders were bunched.

"Put them up," I ordered, holding my gun level.

"Get out of my way, little man," he grumbled, taking a stiff-legged step toward me. "I'll eat you up."

"Keep coming," I said, "and I'll put you down."

"Try it." He took another step, crouching a little. "I can still get to you *with* slugs in me."

"Not where I'll put them." I was wordy, trying to talk him into waiting till the others came up. I didn't want to have to kill him. We could have done that from the taxi. "I'm no Annie Oakley, but if I can't pop your kneecaps with two shots at this distance, you're welcome to me. And if you think smashed kneecaps are a lot of fun, give it a whirl."

"Hell with that," he said and charged.

I shot his right knee.

He lurched toward me.

I shot his left knee.

He tumbled down.

"You would have it," I complained.

He twisted around and with his arms pushed himself into a sitting position facing me.

"I didn't think you had sense enough to do it," he said through his teeth.

I talked to McCloor in the hospital. He lay on his back in bed with a couple of pillows slanting his head up. The skin was pale and tight around his mouth and eyes, but there was nothing else to show he was in pain.

"You sure devastated me, bo," he said when I came in.

"Sorry," I said, "but—"

"I ain't beefing. I asked for it."

"Why'd you kill Holy Joe?" I asked offhand as I pulled a chair up beside the bed.

"Uh-uh—you're tooting the wrong ringer."

I laughed and told him I was the man in the room with Joe when it happened.

McCloor grinned and said, "I thought I'd seen you somewheres

before. So that's where it was. I didn't pay no attention to your mug, just so your hands didn't move."

"Why'd you kill him?"

He pursed his lips, screwed up his eyes at me, thought something over, and said, "He killed a broad I knew."

"He killed Sue Hambleton?" I asked.

He studied my face a while before he replied, "Yep."

"How do you figure that out?"

"Hell," he said, "I don't have to. Sue told me. Give me a butt."

I gave him a cigarette, held a lighter under it, and objected. "That doesn't exactly fit in with other things I know. Just what happened and what did she say? You might start back with the night you gave her the goog."

He looked thoughtful, letting smoke sneak slowly out of his nose, then said, "I hadn't ought to hit her in the eye, that's a fact. But see, she had been out all afternoon and wouldn't tell me where she'd been, and we had a row about it. What's this—Thursday morning? That was Monday, then. After the row I went out and spent the night in a dump over on Army Street. I got home about seven the next morning. Sue was sick as hell, but she wouldn't let me get a croaker for her. That was kind of funny because she was scared stiff."

McCloor scratched his head meditatively and suddenly drew in a great lungful of smoke, practically eating up the rest of the cigarette. He let the smoke leak out of mouth and nose together, looking dully through the cloud at me. Then he said brusquely, "Well, she went under. But before she went, she told me she'd been poisoned by Holy Joe."

"She say how he'd given it to her?"

McCloor shook his head.

"I'd been asking her what was the matter, and not getting anything out of her. Then she starts whining that she's poisoned. 'I'm poisoned, Babe,' she whines. 'Arsenic. That damned Holy Joe,' she says. Then she won't say anything else, and it's not a hell of a while after that that she kicks off."

"Yeah? Then what'd you do?"

"I went gunning for Holy Joe. I knew him but didn't know where he jungled up, and didn't find out till yesterday. You was there when I came. You know about that. I had picked up a boiler and parked it over on Turk Street, for the getaway. When I got back to it, there was a copper standing close to it. I figured he might have

spotted it as a hot one and was waiting to see who came for it, so I let it alone and caught a streetcar instead and cut for the yards. Down there I ran into a whole flock of hammer and saws and had to go overboard in China Basin, swimming up to a pier, being ranked again by a watchman there, swimming off to another, and finally getting through the line only to run into another bad break. I wouldn't of flagged that taxi if the For Hire flag hadn't been up."

"You knew Sue was planning to take a runout on you with Joe?"

"I don't know it yet," he said. "I knew damned well she was cheating on me, but I didn't know who with."

"What would you have done if you had known that?" I asked.

"Me?" He grinned wolfishly. "Just what I did."

"Killed the pair of them," I said.

He rubbed his lower lip with a thumb and asked calmly, "You think I killed Sue?"

"You did."

"Serves me right," he said. "I must be getting simple in my old age. What the hell am I doing barbering with a lousy dick? That never got nobody nothing but grief. Well, you might just as well take it on the heel and toe now, my lad. I'm through spitting."

And he was. I couldn't get another word out of him.

The Old Man sat listening to me, tapping his desk lightly with the point of a long yellow pencil, staring past me with mild blue rimless-spectacled eyes. When I had brought my story up to date, he asked pleasantly, "How's MacMan?"

"He lost two teeth, but his skull wasn't cracked. He'll be out in a couple of days."

The Old Man nodded and asked, "What remains to be done?"

"Nothing. We can put Peggy Carroll on the mat again, but it's not likely we'll squeeze much more out of her. Outside of that, the returns are pretty well all in."

"And what do you make of it?"

I squirmed in my chair and said, "Suicide."

The Old Man smiled at me, politely but skeptically.

"I don't like it either," I grumbled. "And I'm not ready to write in a report yet. But that's the only total that what we've got will add up to. That fly paper was hidden behind the kitchen stove. Nobody would be crazy enough to try to hide something from a woman in her own kitchen like that. But the woman might hide it there."

"According to Peggy, Holy Joe had the fly paper. If Sue hid it, she

got it from him. For what? They were planning to go away together, and were only waiting till Joe, who was on the nut, raised enough dough. Maybe they were afraid of Babe, and had the poison there to slip him if he tumbled to their plan before they went. Maybe they meant to slip it to him before they went anyway.

"When I started talking to Holy Joe about murder, he thought Babe was the one who had been bumped off. He was surprised, maybe, but as if he was surprised that it had happened so soon. He was more surprised when he heard that Sue had died, too, but even then he wasn't so surprised as when he saw McCloor alive at the window.

"She died cursing Holy Joe, and she knew she was poisoned, and she wouldn't let McCloor get a doctor. Can't that mean that she had turned against Joe, and had taken the poison herself instead of feeding it to Babe? The poison was hidden from Babe. But even if he found it, I can't figure him as a poisoner. He's too rough. Unless he caught her trying to poison him and made her swallow the stuff. But that doesn't account for the month-old arsenic in her hair."

"Does your suicide hypothesis take care of that?" the Old Man asked.

"It could," I said. "Don't be kicking holes in my theory. It's got enough as it stands. But if she committed suicide this time, there's no reason why she couldn't have tried it once before—say after a quarrel with Joe a month ago—and failed to bring it off. That would have put the arsenic in her. There's no real proof that she took any between a month ago and day before yesterday."

"No real proof," the Old Man protested mildly, "except the autopsy's finding—chronic poisoning."

I was never one to let experts' guesses stand in my way. I said, "They base that on the small amount of arsenic they found in her remains—less than a fatal dose. And the amount they find in your stomach after you're dead depends on how much you vomit before you die."

The Old Man smiled benevolently at me and asked, "But you're not, you say, ready to write this theory into a report? Meanwhile, what do you propose doing?"

"If there's nothing else on tap, I'm going home, fumigate my brains with Fatimas, and try to get this thing straightened out in my head. I think I'll get a copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and run through it. I haven't read it since I was a kid. It looks like the book was wrapped up with the fly paper to make a bundle large

enough to wedge tightly between the wall and stove, so it wouldn't fall down. But there might be something in the book. I'll see, anyway."

"I did that last night," the Old Man murmured.

I asked, "And?"

He took a book from his desk drawer, opened it where a slip of paper marked a place, and held it out to me, one pink finger marking a paragraph.

"Suppose you were to take a milligram of this poison the first day, two milligrams the second day, and so on. Well, at the end of ten days you would have taken a centigram: at the end of twenty days increasing another milligram, you would have taken three hundred centigrams; that is to say, a dose you would support without inconvenience, and which would be very dangerous for any other person who had not taken the same precautions as yourself. Well then, at the end of the month, when drinking water from the same carafe, you would kill the person who had drunk this water, without your perceiving otherwise than from slight inconvenience that there was any poisonous substance mingled with the water."

"That does it," I said. "That does it. They were afraid to go away without killing Babe, too certain he'd come after them. She tried to make herself immune from arsenic poisoning by getting her body accustomed to it, taking steadily increasing doses, so when she slipped the big shot in Babe's food she could eat it with him without danger. She'd be taken sick but wouldn't die, and the police couldn't hang his death on her because she too had eaten the poisoned food."

"That clicks. After the row Monday night, when she wrote Joe the note urging him to make the getaway soon, she tried to hurry up her immunity and increased her preparatory doses too quickly, took too large a shot. That's why she cursed Joe at the end; it was his plan."

"Possibly she overdosed herself in an attempt to speed it along," the Old Man agreed, "but not necessarily. There are people who can cultivate an ability to take large doses of arsenic without trouble, but it seems to be a sort of natural gift with them, a matter of some constitutional peculiarity. Ordinarily, anyone who tried it would do what Sue Hambleton did—slowly poison themselves until the cumulative effect was strong enough to cause death."

Babe McCloor was hanged, for killing Holy Joe Wales, six months later.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**A** first novel by Cuban-born Carolina Garcia-Aguilera, **Bloody Waters**, introduces a fresh face to the female sleuth scene (Putnam, \$19.95). It promises to get a lot of attention (television rights were sold before publication) and deserves it. Protagonist Lupe Solano is a Cuban-born Miami private eye. She's also hip and sassy, in her late twenties, self-employed, and devoted to her sisters and her wealthy Cuban immigrant father. The case opens with a search for an adopted baby's real mother. Before its conclusion, Lupe must decide whether to make a journey she has only imagined. The Miami setting and Cuban-American characters make this one special.

The Bronx Home for the Aged is the setting for S. J. Rozan's latest New York City mystery featuring private eye Bill Smith and his occasional sidekick, operative Lydia Chin. **Concourse** (St. Martin's, \$21.95) opens with the brutal murder of a young security guard at the home. The guard was not only employed by Smith's former boss and mentor, Bobby Moran, he was also the older man's nephew. The police have the death figured as the work of a neighborhood gang, but Moran isn't convinced. So Smith goes undercover at the home as a favor to Moran. There's lots of hard-edged action, confrontation with the gang, another death, and a complex scheme involving politics, real estate, and big money in this briskly plotted private eye novel. Rozan has a sharp eye for detail: her characters (including the Bronx Home for the Aged itself) leap from the pages.

**Into Thin Air** by Thomas Zigel (Delacorte, \$19.95) introduces a fresh crime fiction series that delivers a whole lot of bang for the buck. Aspen Sheriff Kurt Muller is a hometown boy who's lived a lot of history and has done his share of mourning: for his beloved

brother Bert, dead in a climbing accident; for Meg, his wife and the mother of their young son Lennon, who has left Colorado to "find herself" in a faraway ashram; for his German-born mother, whose health has exiled her from her Aspen home to the warmer clime of Arizona; and for Jake, his boyhood friend, who has long been targeted by the FBI for a murder they've never been able to pin on him. Perhaps more than anything, though, Kurt misses the Aspen of his youth, almost obscured by the drugs and crime, glitz and glamor of the city today. The novel opens with the disappearance of a South American journalist who was in town to speak against his government's atrocities. From there Zigal begins a twisty tale that reopens Muller's old wounds, and neatly ties all the elements together in one mind-reeling package. Muller is sympathetic, and the plot is complex and filled with action. This is a thriller with a big heart.

Paul Levine continues his series of thrillers featuring a former linebacker turned Florida lawyer in **Fool Me Twice** (Morrow, \$22). Jake Lassiter, who has successfully defended a number of clients, finds himself in the defendant's chair this time. He's accused of murdering an old acquaintance and con man named Blinky Baroso who is also the brother of a former flame turned high-powered D.A. As the noose of circumstantial evidence tightens, Lassiter flees to Colorado on the trail of Blinky's last great scheme: to locate a treasure lost for a hundred years, the priceless Silver Queen statue. Lassiter is an original, and his world is populated with fellow originals (most notably his family). There's some law in this one, but there's more of the unexpected and dangerous turns of a conventional thriller spiced with some fascinating Colorado mining lore.

Barry Estabrook's **Whirlpool** (St. Martin's, \$21.95) brings back Garwood Plunkett, veteran cop working his home territory in the Adirondacks. The locale offers lots of fishing lore and colorful locals in addition to the discovery of a floater in the river. The authorities put the death down to an accident, but Plunkett disagrees: local millionaire Barron Quinnell knew better than to go fishing in that part of the river with the fly he was evidently using. Estabrook structures Plunkett's new case as a caper, and it's a neat one involving a former young love, a high-finance scheme, and a loose-cannon psychopath—all of which goes down as smoothly as old scotch.

**Penance** (Foul Play Press, \$21), a first novel by David Housewright, introduces Minnesota gumshoe Holland Taylor. Taylor is a



thirty-something former cop and now a journeyman investigator with a personal tragedy in his past, a Rolodex brimming with eccentric and useful sources, a powerful P.C., and a taste for Pig's Eye brew. He's bright, droll, and dogged—and he'll have to be all three to swim with the sharks in the pools he's frequenting these days. The novel opens in a grim police interrogation room with Taylor insisting on client confidentiality in spite of a recent murder. What with the little matter of the bookie and the card cheat, readers might conclude that Taylor has enough on his plate without taking on a search for a blackmailer, but who can refuse the beautiful C. C. Monroe, gubernatorial candidate with a healthy chance of winning the upcoming state election? Fans of private eye novels will appreciate this newest entry to the ranks.

Agatha Award winner Jeff Abbott's **Promises of Home** (Ballantine, \$4.50) is a crowd-pleaser on many levels. Its narrator is Jordy Poteet, born and reared in Mirabeau, Texas, and back home now after a Manhattan publishing job to help take care of a mother afflicted with Alzheimer's and a sister and nephew abandoned by the man who was once his best friend. Jordy is delightfully wry, the ideal tour guide to the town and its individualistic inhabitants. Living and working among them as the town's librarian, he is one of them and yet distanced enough to view the residents with both wit and wisdom. The plot centers around old secrets that have been left to fester, specifically why Jordy's boyhood friend Trey walked out on Jordy's sister and their small son years earlier. When a member of his boyhood club dies, Trey returns for the funeral. And then there's another death. A strong plot, super characters, and writing that evokes both laughter and tears should put Abbott back in the winner's circle this year.

The number of American fans of Colin Dexter's melancholic Oxford C.I.D. Chief Inspector Morse grows with every new episode of the excellent PBS series. Now there's a volume of short stories to add to the canon, **Morse's Greatest Mystery and Other Stories** (Crown, \$23), and it won't disappoint. Although only six of the eleven stories feature Morse, there are several other gems as well, including a new Sherlock Holmes tale ("A Case of Mis-Identity") faithfully chronicled by Watson. Look to Dexter for strong puzzles, sharp characterization, and a hearty helping of wit.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Isabel Richmond of Plainsboro, go to Joseph H. Page of Hillsboro of Orem, Utah; John F. Besnardling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Diginia; Avonelle Kelsey of Carlsalatin, Oregon; Audrey G. DeVilLum of Alhambra, California; and J. T. Carr of Marietta, Georgia.



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## LES SENTINELS by Isabel Richmond

I was writing up invoices and Astrid was polishing when I glanced through the display window and noticed them. The two scruffy cats walked slowly toward each other, then stopped twenty feet apart and sat down in front of the apartment building across the street.

It wasn't a busy day, and we kept sneaking looks out the window. The cats never moved. They sat like a matched pair of Egyptian sculptures, as if they had been there forever, as if they would outlast the city. They didn't move as people walked towards them, and they seemed so mysteriously rooted no one tried to bump them aside. Throughout the day a little crowd gathered, watching the cats. It was almost four thirty when the police arrived. Three of them went into the apartment building, walking between the cats, who sat as precisely placed and immobile as library lions. We gave up all pretense of indifference and opened the door. As the police came back out of the building, a young man thrashing between them, I asked the policeman standing nearby what was happening.

"We are arresting Claude Fourchet for murdering his grandmother last night."

"And them?" I waved my hand at the cats.

"Her neighbors say she fed the strays."

Fourchet was shoved into the back of one of the police cars, and they all drove off. When the street was quiet, the cats got up and stretched. They stood still for a moment, then turned and trotted away.

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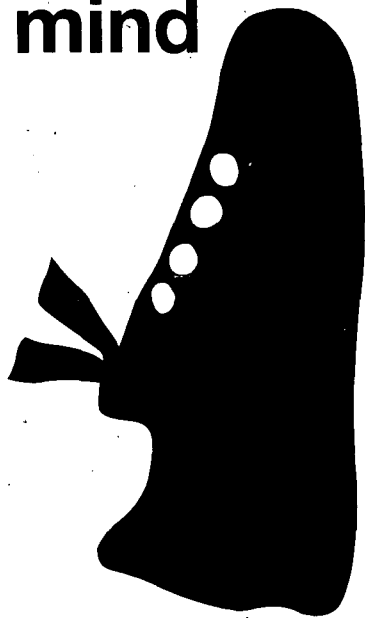
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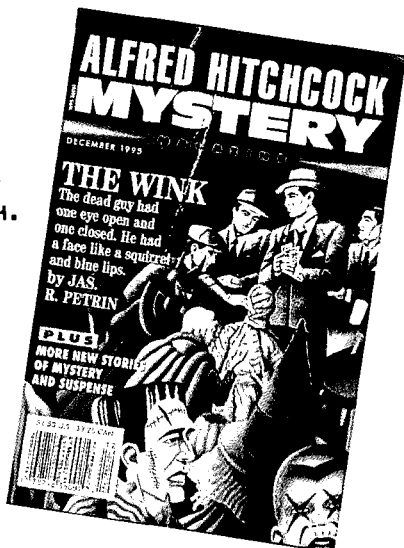
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